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Museums and the public sphere in Australia: between rhetoric and practice

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Declaration

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

[Signature]

Angela Philp
January 2006
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Abstract

In my thesis I describe and critically evaluate the nature of the museum as an ensemble of communication acts within the theoretical model of the public sphere. I use this model to study the changes that have been occurring to museological practice and policy. These changes have occurred in the context of contemporary critiques of modernist principles of museology, and in response to the emergence of economic rationalism, the increasing corporatisation and commercialisation of museums, and the new information economy.

The thesis investigates two comparative case studies - two national institutions — the National Museum of Australia, and the National Gallery of Australia. Cultural policies of the sort professed by the institutions of culture — be they state sponsored or otherwise — are not just metastatements on the cultural practices of the public sphere, but are communication acts in the same milieu as the creative acts to which they refer. Evidently, museums are cultural institutions that generate and profess their cultural policies through the practical tasks of collecting, exhibiting, researching and conserving the objects (or communication acts) that they value. Indeed, each of these tasks for which the museum is internally responsible are also translatable as social statements, directed externally to the museum’s immediate, localised audience or market as well as to a more or less remote sense of community.

I examine current museological practices and policies within the new economic, professionalised milieu. Certain activities of contemporary museums, which might be described as post-modern, apparently defend revised artistic and cultural values – the museum as forum. Yet there are disjunctures between policy and practice that may be said to diminish the ethical dimension of cultural communication which has been such a significant aspect of the museum’s contemporary mission as an agent in the public sphere.
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A declaration of interest

In 1980, when I was a young art teacher at a ‘disadvantaged’ high school in Sydney’s outer western suburbs, I took a group of my Year 11 students to the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW). They were all enthusiastic art students, but had never before visited the Gallery and were eager to see its permanent collections and current exhibitions. It took us an hour and a half by bus each way to get there. The class spent the whole day there, enjoyed seeing the work on display and had many vigorous discussions about what we had seen. Close to the end of our visit we entered the Gallery bookshop. In those days, the bookshop was still being staffed by members of the AGNSW Friends’ group. The high prices of the hard-bound pictorial art books made an impression on these students and caused them to comment on this, feeling keenly a desire to take some souvenir of their visit home with them, but with very little money to be able to afford anything. The woman behind the counter, dressed expensively, with a very plum upper-class voice, heard the students’ comments. She looked at me and declared loudly, making sure the students heard her: ‘what do you expect, given where they come from!’ She had, of course, absolutely no idea about where these students came from but her own prejudices were confirmed by their demeanour, clothing and comments. For the rest of the day, as we left the building and spent our long journey home on the bus, the students forgot everything else they had seen and done. All they could talk about was this woman’s comment and attitude. They were, naturally, offended, upset and deeply wounded by this experience. While the collection was open to them, and

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1 The school, James Meehan High School at Macquarie Fields, was classified ‘disadvantaged’ by the NSW Department of Education based on the lower socio-economic circumstances of its population. This classification allowed the school to receive additional funds to assist in giving parity with better-resourced regions.
offered a dialogue, one particularly vivid act of communication had eclipsed it all, and delivered a message that the Art Gallery of New South Wales (at least in 1980) was not meant for them. Nothing could persuade them otherwise. This seemed more than the smothering of an individual, more than a mere circumstance. It embodied an attitude about access to culture, and it was manifest in a communication act: not only by the woman at the counter, but also by the students in their responses. It would be difficult imagining any of those students returning (most declared at the time that they never would) or at least it would have taken considerable confidence as they matured to gather the courage to enter the portals again.

In 1983 I commenced working on the Education staff of the new National Gallery of Australia, beginning a long career in museums. That one day at the AGNSW is ingrained in my consciousness and has remained a constant reminder of why I care about museums and why it is so important to be aware of what a museum says in the public sphere.
Part One: Sites for Cultural Communication

Introduction

The public sphere and the manufacture of a national culture through the museum

This project has arisen out of an interest in analysing my own experiences as a museum professional and my own observations of the changing nature of the field, including the many changes in exhibiting and collecting practices over the last two decades. I began working in museums as a member of the Education staff of the National Gallery of Australia in 1983. In this capacity I was involved in introducing the collection to a wide range of students from pre-school to tertiary level and from all over Australia. I was very aware of the divergent backgrounds that students brought with them when looking at art and sought new ways to bring their own experiences into play to assist them in learning to look at and understand art. One memorable visit was from Lightning Ridge Primary School, whose students had never even been in a building with elevators and escalators before, let alone had ever seen the range of works of art that the National Gallery contained. Their visit, needless to say, first required an exploration of the building itself, mapping out the galleries with their many nooks and crannies. There were questions about why the ceilings were so high,
or why there were so many floors. They were excited to find that there was a café and sculpture garden outside.

When I moved from education into curatorial work as Curator/Director of the Nolan Gallery in Canberra, I became increasingly conscious of the need to not just deliver art historical interpretations of the art on the walls, but to provide visitors, including those not taking a guided tour, with the means to develop their own confidence in looking at and interpreting art (regardless of their art historical knowledge) and to thus not feel excluded from a capacity to discuss the works and their meanings.

Later, I became the inaugural Director of the Canberra Museum and Gallery (CMAG) (opened in 1998), a museum which combined the art practices and social history of the Canberra region. From the earliest planning stages my staff and I engaged in debates about how we were going to integrate these two disciplines and about the different assumptions that each discipline tended to make about exhibition content, design, interpretation and the role of the object/artefact. We questioned our own assumptions continuously, but always agreed that our objective was to have an open museum, working in partnership with communities and entering into topical debates whenever possible.

Our mission was tempered frequently by the need to obey the directives of our bureaucratic and political masters. (CMAG did not have independent statutory status, but was totally embedded within the ACT Government bureaucracy.) This limited the capacity to set our own priorities in conjunction with our various communities and interest groups. On many occasions we were required to mount exhibitions because they were arranged by politicians to foster goodwill with some of their business or diplomatic constituents. Our planned open community resource centre with street frontage had to be abandoned so that a restaurant could take its place to earn revenue for the organization. As Director, I did not have a voice with the Board because the CEO of the ACT Government’s Cultural Facilities Corporation (our umbrella organisation within
government) attended Board meetings as the representative of all the cultural facilities run by the ACT Government.

These limitations led me to question the capability of similar museums to really fulfil the promise of new museological ambitions, such as being a site of dialogue in the public sphere. Thus I undertook this research as a means to explore whether this was a broader problem than just that facing local ACT institutions.

This thesis, therefore, is concerned with the nature of the contemporary museum, particularly in Australia, and will focus on an art museum and a social history museum. In particular, I explore the gap between the rhetoric of the contemporary Australian museum as a site of communication within the public sphere, and two museums, whose practices appear to diminish that communication, even as they profess to maintain it.

This inevitably involves an exploration of the theoretical nature of the public sphere as well as the concept of communication, or 'communicative action'; and how this might manifest itself in a museum context. Since the French cultural critic André Malraux, whose work in the 1940s and subsequently, examined the way in which our understanding of art and culture is created and shaped by the museum (whereas the easily reproduced image can circulate without boundaries

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1 Australia, following the practice established in Britain, differentiated types of museums: generally using the term 'museum' to describe institutions focusing on natural history, science, and more recently, social history; institutions collecting and exhibiting art have been referred to as 'galleries'. However, all these institutions have historically shared common beliefs in their mission and purpose as public, scholarly and educational sites, and subscribe to similar professional principles and practices. Public art galleries in Australia are in fact 'museums'—they collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret objects in the manner of all museums. I will use the term 'museum' for all these institutions, as is the practice elsewhere.

2 This is a theory proposed by Jürgen Habermas in which speech becomes the basis for agreement. This will be explored later in the Introduction. See Habermas, Jürgen, 1984, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, two volumes, translated by Thomas McCarthy, 1987, Beacon Press, Boston.

and transforms the way we experience art), many analysts have drawn on the museum as a potent site of pedagogical authority, an institution that operates to reproduce the dominant social and cultural practices of its time. I will draw on the work of theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, whose thorough investigations of the French art museum in the 1950s and 1960s have explicated the bourgeois 'civilising' characteristics of the western art museum; Foucault's work on power, knowledge and the archive, including his skepticism of the notion of historical progress; Jean-Francois Lyotard's analysis of postmodernity and grand narratives; and Michel de Certeau's work on the practice of the everyday which will assist in analysing the disciplinary boundaries of museums.4 Homi Bhabha's identification of a Third Space, that of the interstices between cultures, will be useful in examining the incorporation of cultural difference in the museum.5 Contemporary analyses of governmentality and managerial practices inform the thesis, especially in their effects on the stated missions of museums. The writings and influence of Jürgen Habermas about the nature of the public sphere will also be particularly useful.6 While Foucault's work challenged mechanisms of power, and is useful in analysing the nature of the museum as an institution, and while authors such as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have expanded the notion of

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5 See Bhabha, Homi, 1994, The Location of Culture, Routledge, London.

the public sphere to include plural discourses, it is Habermas who has described a sphere for democratic debates, identifying it with a public sphere and civil society. Habermas's work has generated considerable debate, and his discussion of concepts such as the 'lifeworld' (the world of everyday action and beliefs) is identified with the public sphere and civil society. This work has particular relevance to the current discussions on museums, in this country and elsewhere, about the role of museums as sites and catalysts for debate on matters of public interest — sometimes referring to the museum as a 'forum'. Increasingly seen as agents of social inclusion, museums have unwittingly or without knowing it responded to Bourdieu's analysis of the bourgeois 'habitus' of the museum (in which the working class is 'deficient') by questioning their own exclusionary practices. Part of the desire for a forum, for inclusion in the deliberations of a public sphere, is to create a space of greater relevance to and interest from wider dimensions of society. To some extent this is self-directed, a genuine interest in contributing to positive social change. However it is undoubtedly also a feature of the imposition of governmental controls seeking evidence of its investment in the public good as well as the demands of increasingly vocal and politicised minority groups — in other words, those previously excluded from representation and participation in the museum. Equally, there are those who view these shifts as corroding the apparent objectivity and scholarship of the museum. I argue that, instead, the continued allegiance to certain elements of modern museological practice and a range of external pressures actually erode the capacity of the museum to genuinely engage in its new work of social agency and debate.

Foucault, Lyotard and Bennett have particularly offered critiques of Habermas and useful discussions on modernity, postmodernity and power. Their work offers a more nuanced account of Habermas's public sphere. In chapter three I

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will use de Certeau to draw out the issue of productivist logic as a feature of the new consumerism in museums. Homi Bhabha’s theory of a Third Space has allows me, in chapter seven, to dissect the influence of globalisation and multiple identities as they now interact with the museum.

In addition to the theorists outlined above, on which the thesis is based, there have been many international studies of museums in the past two decades that have shifted the professional emphasis on museum technical standards, scholarship and education to a broader analysis of relationships with audiences and potential audiences alike, writing the histories of museums in attempts to understand their origins and raising the possibilities of greater and more direct social engagement and agency on the part of the museum. This has been described as the new museology. These studies, particularly from the UK and the USA and some from Australia, have included some influential texts such as Tony Bennett’s *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995), Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine’s collection of essays *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1988), Stephen Weil’s *Rethinking the Museum* (1990) and Peter Vergo’s collection of essays *The New Museology* (1989). The museum has become a site of intense interest for historians, art historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and all those concerned with the ritualised power and hierarchised practices of institutions of culture. These studies have paralleled calls for change from within the museum profession that have led to revised statements of mission and policy, and efforts to put these into practice.

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Tony Bennett's work, detailing the development of museums as sites for the construction of power and the education of citizens (in *The Birth of the Museum*) and investigating Australian cultural policy and its effects\(^{10}\), is particularly useful in analyzing concepts of spectacle and what he calls the exhibitionary complex. I will draw on this especially in chapter five on the National Gallery. In addition to Tony Bennett's work, there are a number of useful Australian studies of museums and of cultural policy. These include very early reports on and histories of Australian museums, such as the 1933 Carnegie Report on Museums and Art Galleries in Australia and New Zealand and R. T. M Pescott's 1954 history of the National Museum of Victoria, as well as later government papers like the Commonwealth Government Finance Department's *What Price Heritage?* (1999) - which subjected the arts and museum sector to an economic rationalist interpretation - and its rejoinder from the Department of the Arts *What Value Heritage?* (1990).\(^{11}\) In recent years Australian museum professionals have debated their field in forums such as the annual conferences of the Art Museums Association of Australia and the Council of Australian Museum Associations (which amalgamated in 1993 to become *Museums Australia*\(^2\) and which is now Australia's peak professional museums' association). Writers such as Donald Horne (in *The Great Museum*, 1984) and Andrea Witcomb (in *Re-Imagining the


\(^{12}\) Museums Australia represents all museums professionals, in all disciplines, and from all types of museums. It has a website at [www.museumsaustralia.org.au](http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au). Recent conference papers are available on the site.
Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum, 2003) have critically engaged the museum.\textsuperscript{13} Witcomb, for instance, employed an interdisciplinary approach in analysing the location of Australian museums in the nexus between models of museums as representatives of traditional elites and contemporary democratic sites of civic reform. Similarly, an extensive range of writers has contributed to further study on Australian museums and the debates on its methodologies, philosophies, policies and politics.\textsuperscript{14} For instance, historian Professor Ann Curthoys has written on new ways of constructing history in the museum\textsuperscript{15}, and Viv Szekeres (Director of the Migration Museum in South Australia) has put the case for the new inclusiveness of museums.\textsuperscript{16} The work of Dr Jennifer Barrett on the public sphere and its relationship to public space is of particular interest to my thesis.\textsuperscript{17} There are also increasing numbers of post-graduate theses on Australian museums.\textsuperscript{18} These studies have contributed to an increasingly active and vibrant field and have provided an important basis for further study and analysis.


\textsuperscript{16} For example, Szekeres, Viv, 1995, ‘A place for us all’, Public History Review. No. 4, pp. 59 – 64.

\textsuperscript{17} See Barrett, Jennifer, 2001, ‘Making space for the public’ in Barrett, Jennifer and Butler-Bowden, Caroline (eds.), 2001, Debating the City: an anthology. Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales in association with the University of Western Sydney; and Barrett, Jennifer, 1999, ‘Assuming democracy: art in public spaces’, the unillustrated proceedings of Malor, Deborah and Johnson, Heather (eds.) Watch This Space: a conference on public art. The Australian Journal of Art and the School of Fine Art, University of Newcastle, pp. 63 – 72. Her PhD thesis investigated public space and the public sphere, particularly looking at the history and contemporary uses of the site of Port Jackson, Sydney. Unfortunately I have been unable to obtain a copy of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{18} For example, post-graduate theses in progress or nearing completion include Uros Cvoro on postcolonial history in the National Museum of Australia (UNSW, College of Fine Arts); Carol Scott on social, personal and economic impacts of museums (University of Sydney); Derek Monz on the development of museums in Australia and their relationships with the public 1915 – 1945 (University of the Sunshine Coast); Lisa Chandler on representations of Indigenous art
The practical focus of this thesis is the period starting in 1982, with the opening of the then named Australian National Gallery (ANG), later to become the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), an icon of Australian cultural maturity. The period examined by the thesis concludes in principle with the opening of the new National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2001, although in effect the period includes subsequent struggles (up to 2003) over the NMA's role in articulating national identities and histories. In many respects this period can be seen as a watershed in the history of Australian museums. The NGA and the NMA are my two primary case studies – both national and high profile institutions, and, being national, both bear the expectations of being seen to adequately represent the nation, and, by implication, to thus describe in their terms what 'nation' means. These case studies also provide an opportunity to explore the differences between the disciplines of art and social history as they operate in the museum, differences which point to varying capacities to realise the promise of the new museology. Given my emphasis on the rhetorical public declarations of these museums and the differences between this rhetoric and their everyday internal practices, my primary focus is on their public statements - their policies, missions, reports and public comments, their public exhibitions and practices – which stress the ways these museums visualise themselves. In addition I have done considerable fieldwork within these institutions, particularly investigating their temporary exhibitions and permanent displays.

The opening of the NGA marked the late culmination of a period of museum practice in Australia dedicated to the acquisition, presentation and research of collections describing a sense of nationalist pride and the promotion of cultural practices in iconic form – visualising and celebrating the nation-state. While

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19 Known initially as the Australian National Gallery (ANG), the institution changed its name to National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in October 1982. As this thesis is concerned with the Gallery from its beginnings up to the present day, the Gallery will be referred to as the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) throughout.

and the Queensland Art Gallery (ANU); and Bernice Murphy on the development of the museum profession in Australia (ANU).
recognisably diverse and to a degree complex, this national identity was ultimately unitary in order to signal a mature, consistent nationality that could represent itself as independent in the international domain. The opening of the National Gallery could be considered an expression of sentiments of national pride that produced populist national characteristics and vernacular stereotypes as well as a national high culture (see chapter one).

The National Gallery’s opening also began a process of enlarged discussion about the role of cultural institutions in Australia. Its impact was enormous, not dissimilar to the discussions around the new National Museum two decades later, and profoundly affecting the development of institutions in the other states – re-igniting regionalist impulses as well as debates about the nature and expression of Australian culture, as I will demonstrate in chapter two.

Throughout the 1980s, many smaller museum projects and museum extensions around Australia came to fruition through the activities of local councils and state governments, promoting both civic pride and tourism.20 This was also a boom time for employment in the arts and heritage at community level.21 Even in relatively small localities, many of these museums could be interpreted as expressions of the nationalist cultural policies that had helped produce the NGA, incorporated into ensembles of cultural attitudes that defined national character, from the Stockman’s Hall of Fame in Longreach, Queensland to the Orange Regional Gallery in New South Wales. This was also a period of increased entrepreneurial interest in theme-park styled outdoor museums celebrating Australian history, such as the so-called ‘pioneer village’ or colonial

20 Professor David Throsby, for example, has noted the expansion of art galleries from the 1970s to the 1980s, in Throsby, David, 2002, ‘Centenary Article: Public Funding of the Art in Australia 1900 – 2000, Australian Bureau of Statistics website, no pagination.  
www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/ED192B5A87F90DBECA2569DFE0025C1A6OOpen  

21 ibid.
and folk museums (the now failed Old Sydney Town was one example, as is Sovereign Hill at Ballarat). The emergence of these localised community (but also commercial) cultural institutions intersected with the mission of the NGA to provide occasions for discussion about the role of cultural institutions within an Australian environment celebrating its history through, in particular, its colonial past.

From the mid 1990s we were witnessing the development of major new museum projects, in Australia and world-wide, identified with more pluralist thinking, feminism, multiculturalism, post-colonial studies and critical explorations of national, regional and local identities. The past decade or so has seen the opening of the National Museum of Australia (2001), the Museum of Sydney (1995), the Immigration Museum in Melbourne (1998), the new building of the Melbourne Museum (2000), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (1991), the Canberra Museum and Gallery (1998), the new National Gallery of Victoria Ian Potter Centre for Australian Art, in Melbourne’s Federation Square (2002), and the National Portrait Gallery (1998) to mention only a few. Similarly, New Zealand opened its new national museum, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Our Place)22, in 1998, and New Caledonia opened the Tjibaou Centre (1998), a new expression of Kanak culture. South Africa opened the District Six Museum in Cape Town23 in 1994 and the Robben Island Museum in 1997; the new Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo opened in 1995; the Singapore Art Museum opened in 1996; new premises were opened for the existing Shanghai Museum in 1996 and for the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore in 2003; the Tate Modern, in London, opened in 2000; the National Museum of the American Indian opened in Washington DC in 2004; and the Museo Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain, opened in 1997. There have been

22 Te Papa has had to deal with controversies over its representations of Maori and Pakeha culture and history. See for example Gore, James, 2002, Representations of History and Nation in Museums in Australia and New Zealand — the National Museum of Australia and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Melbourne.
new regional museums built across Australia and major renovations and extensions of many others. It is not insignificant that these projects were also developed in the context of a new government-promoted cultural tourism market and what has been termed a new ‘pervasive managerialisation’ which is linked with the increasing corporatisation or commercialisation of museums. Similarly, government in Australia (and, for example, Britain) promotes what are now called ‘the creative industries,’ in which creative production is targeted at commercial development.

The National Museum of Australia (NMA) opened in March 2001, marking the Centenary of Federation. Surprisingly, given this value-laden date, the NMA could be said to represent a very different concept of national identity to that which prevailed at the foundations of the NGA. The NMA embraces a far more diverse perspective of Australian identity and has incorporated multidisciplinary methods in its museum practice. Many of the controversial cultural and social topics that dominated public debate, both scholarly and popular, throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Indigenous issues in particular) are evident in the policies guiding the direction and management of the NMA. In brief, one could characterise the difference between the NGA’s 1982 depiction of Australian identity and that of the NMA in 2001 as being the difference, on one hand,

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24 This term was quoted in 1996, in McGuigan, Jim, Culture and the public sphere, Routledge, p. 61, citing John Clarke and Janet Newman, 1993, ‘The Right to Manage – A Second Managerial Revolution?’, Cultural Studies, Vol. 7, No.3. It was identified as ‘an ideological discourse…which aims to make management the driving force of a competitively successful society.’

25 The Queensland University of Technology describes the creative industries as ‘activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which also have the potential for creating wealth and jobs. The creative industries can include areas such as: literature and print media; performing arts; music composition and publishing; visual arts and crafts; design, broadcasting, electronic media and film; and heritage activities At QUT, our Creative Industries Faculty teaches students in traditional creative areas, but places these within a new creative industries framework. This means that our students don’t just learn their craft. They also learn how they fit into the creative industries and how they can use their talents to be part of the new economy’. [My emphasis] http://www.creativeindustries.qut.com/aboutus/q1.jsp [Accessed: 25.11.2005].

between an identity constituted in or originating from a colonial history, and, on the other, an identity diffracted through a postcolonial deconstruction of that foundational story. Former director Dawn Casey declared the NMA to be:

a forum — a place for sharing stories, for exchanging information about different cultures, and creating linkages between people. In designing the new facility, we have provided a number of spaces where debate and discussion will be possible in an information-rich environment and within a framework of mutual respect.27

The NMA and NGA each address very different communities (though sometimes their interests overlap) and have very different relationships with their constituents and with government. Each reveals alternative ways of addressing a public, of negotiating historical material, and participating in public debate and action. While intense media interest has brought these institutions to popular attention, the role of the media in relation to the museum is a much larger subject than can be dealt with here. Instead this thesis will investigate issues of outlook and function, by examining policy documents and public statements and the communication acts that are constituted by collecting and exhibiting, and assess how far one may identify nation-wide trends and issues. One of these institutions is very new, both conceptually and physically, while the other is in the process of renegotiating a path shaped by its modern origins, but now informed by a new emphasis on relationships with its visitors that are hoped to be more reciprocal and dynamic. Issues of audience development and analysis of their responses to museums are important in the new museology; however I will not focus on this area, but instead will concentrate on the rhetoric of museums in relation to the audiences they imagine for themselves. Similarly, while I recognise that philosophies of multiculturalism and government policies to incorporate and celebrate multiculturalism have had a major impact on museums in Australia, I have chosen to use a case study of

Indigeneity as a marker of significant shifts in Australian museums, as will be seen in chapter four.

The thesis makes a contribution to scholarship by being the first systematic analysis of Australian museums and the public sphere to cover this recent period and the first to focus on the two national institutions of art and history. It expands and builds upon previous studies by, for example, Tom Griffiths (who largely dealt with an historical ethnographic context) and Tony Bennett (whose analysis has been more broadly focused) and publicly prominent commentators such as Donald Horne, to look in depth at the recent history and practice of new or expanding contemporary Australian institutions. While the new National Museum has attracted significant recent scholarship, it has generally not been in the context of an interdisciplinary approach, focusing largely on its national role. It is also timely to investigate in the Australian context the effects of government on these national institutions. There has been little linking of museums and theories of the public sphere in terms of case studies and this thesis will examine and critique the relationship between them.

The public sphere and the museum

Just what is the 'public sphere'? In the simplest terms it could be said to be the 'domain of common concern', the agora or commons, describing the place or space in which issues and ideas become the object of critical attention by the citizens of a society. Distinct from state legislative apparatuses but not from


politics, nor from state intervention, this public sphere is the forum in which social identity is forged.\textsuperscript{31}

In contrast, the private sphere refers to the domain of home and family, the intimate sphere. Here were allocated, in the modern western realm, the issues of moral and religious conscience, but also largely the world of women, which placed the sexual division of labour beyond the scope of ‘public’ justice or norms. This is now the subject of new critiques.\textsuperscript{32}

The public sphere is an historical concept. Since the 1960s, especially in his \textit{Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere} (1962), German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has written of a ‘public sphere’ that was developed in the coffee houses of eighteenth century Enlightenment Europe\textsuperscript{33}. It was a social phenomenon that saw the discussion of issues of common concern to citizens in a comparatively open and accessible forum. It was however largely composed of the rising bourgeois or middle-class (adopting or emulating the rights and privileges of the aristocracy) and included only educated males, excluding women and the working class, and those without education or financial means, or the leisure to participate.


Habermas, in his later (1981) two volume *Theory of Communicative Action*, has expanded upon and identified two elements of society in his theorisation of the public sphere: the 'lifeworld' and the 'system world'. The 'lifeworld', or the world of everyday activities, is associated with the public sphere and civil society, that realm of activity that is separate from that of the state or government. Rather than associations dictated by government structures, civil society encompasses the links and common interests of free individuals who agree to abide by the principle of majority rule as the basis of living in relative harmony. The idea that individuals are free and agree to live together harmoniously is, of course, problematic, and an idealised view of the public sphere, which Habermas himself admits. (Habermas has also had major differences with Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard, who believed that the project of modernity was over, and with Foucault, who asserted the dominance of power over reason.) Historian and sociologist Stuart Hall identified three main zones of civil society: 'the private domestic world of the family; the arena of free and contractual economic activity — the market; and the domain of voluntary social and political association.' For Marx and Hegel however, the state overrides civil society, functioning to reconcile conflicting interests, such as property rights, and eventually subsuming it. Hall, however, noted that new liberalism's privatised concept of society reverses this, and puts civil society above the state.

Habermas also described a 'system world', the site of the capitalist economy and the bureaucracy of modern society, in which 'the division of labour, the development of the productive forces and the accumulation of knowledge result in the emergence of a number of “systems” with either a steering (decision-

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37 ibid.
making) or an “institutional” role."38 Systems are free from all moral constraints and act in accordance with the ends and means logic of strategic action, or what Adorno and Horkeimer call ‘instrumental reason’. Systems tend to evolve into an alienated pseudo-nature against which there is no appeal and constantly threaten to invade or colonise the lifeworld...39 For Habermas the lifeworld is the space of real democratic communication, while I assert that in Australia government-funded museums are forced to operate more in the ‘system’, while often appealing to the ‘lifeworld’ in their rhetorical stances. Habermas has been criticised for, and himself acknowledges, that his theory describes an ideal situation rather than an existing reality.40 It has been noted that ‘constitutional democracy offers a potential space for such discussions, but the “democratic deficit” signalled by bureaucratic non-accountability and non-participation on the part of citizens greatly restricts its potential.41 Additionally, Habermas’s assessment was that the public sphere has declined as a result of consumerism, commodity culture and the mass media, whose communications only go in one direction and are constrained by media monopolies.42 He believes that public critical dialogue has been replaced by apolitical consumption — certainly an accusation levelled at some museum practices in recent years, as will be explored in my case studies.

For Habermas, the lifeworld is the sphere of communicative rationality, while the system is directed by money and power, omitting principles of value and meaning. Modernisation has led, he says, to an ‘uncoupling of system and lifeworld’43 and the system now tends to encroach upon or colonise the lifeworld, diminishing or limiting the public sphere, in the sense that values and

41 ibid.
42 The Internet, however, could be said to provide new opportunities for interactive communication.
meanings are reduced to consumerism or market forces. Habermas does not, however, address the possibility of multiple public spheres, defined by different interest groups and demographics, spheres that the new museum is attempting to acknowledge and address. There are strong arguments to suggest that some public spheres are diminishing. For example, the mass media is increasingly controlled by conglomerates in the hands of a few and with primarily commercial interests; shopping malls (privately owned) are replacing the public commons; and individualism is promoted by commercial markets eager to foster consumerism as the generating force of a market-oriented society. Cultural theorist Jim McGuigan, noting Howard Rheingold's theorisation of virtual communities in cyberspace, and reflecting on Rheingold's concept of a phantom public sphere taking the place of real democratic communications, contemplated the issue of how the public sphere is merely simulated under unrestrained market forces. Habermas's lifeworld, then, is that sphere in which people engage on a day-to-day basis, a social sphere separate from government structures and systems. The new museology engages both the everyday sphere and the world of government and politics as they impact upon it. Perhaps the question for museums then is whether their efforts at promoting debate, the forum, produce actual communication or merely simulations of it.

Nevertheless, Habermas described the transformative possibilities for society of an effective public sphere and included three essentials if it were to be successful. These were: universal access; rational debate on any topic that could be raised by any participant ('rational' meaning something that could be persuasively argued for); and that the rank or status of participants was irrelevant and would be ignored, in other words, every participant was considered equal.

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44 See for example, McGuigan, Jim, 1996, *Culture and the Public Sphere*, and Fraser, Nancy, 1992, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere – A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Calhoun, C. (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
He called the debate that would ensue ‘communicative action,’ in which debate, through written discourse, and deliberation, would aim for consensus or agreement and result in action. Of course, the desire for consensus (also a familiar slogan in the Australian Hawke Labor Government’s political rhetoric) is a task that ultimately fails to give voice to minority or marginalised groups. This has been one of the major criticisms of Habermas’s work on the public sphere, particularly by Jean-François Lyotard, whose distrust of ‘grand narratives’ suggests that they serve merely to legitimate the monopoly of institutional truths and authority – for Lyotard, the postmodern liberates us from these illusions. Still, the need for such a space that is beyond the undue influence of the state, the economy, the church and other instrumentalities is as urgent as ever. The idea of the public sphere has an inherent and problematic gap between rhetoric and reality, but the important moral and ethical issues of a society still need to be addressed. Perhaps the idea of an open discourse, though without the imperative of consensus is still a good one, even if leaving the possibility of potential action problematic. Of course, it is also now impossible to think of the public sphere as a unified space. John Urry, an historian, has referred to ‘many disorganising developments in modern societies [that] are feeding into and generating a much more complex, differentiated and politically contested set of spheres of social life, of culture, leisure, arts and architecture, consumption, environmentalism, feminism, ethnicity, local democracy and so on.’

Culture, both in the institutional sense of objects produced by professional artists or writers and the history that a society produces, is a crucial instrument and stake within the public sphere. That culture, which is represented in our museums, is one of the genres of social acts of communication which constitute the public sphere. Here I diverge from Habermas, who believes that art and

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creative activities are too subjective and not suitable as subjects for the public sphere. While this may apply to original creative production, I assert that the museum is different from its contents, and that its practices form part of the development of public opinion. Cultural policies of the sort professed by institutions of culture—be they state sponsored or otherwise—are not metastatements on the cultural practices of the public sphere, but are communication acts in the same milieu as the creative or social acts to which they refer. They establish standards and practices that reveal a set of values about the world and about cultural and social life. These values are transmitted through both the fabric of the museum itself and its daily operations. Every visitor learns the expectations the museum has of them simply by inhabiting its spaces and accessing its programs.

This cultural public sphere includes both the production of culture by, for instance, artists, writers and performers as well as by museums, and its consumption in cultural institutions and markets. It is also a place in which public discourse occurs, though Habermas’s three essentials (universal access, rational debate, and equality of participants) have, historically, not always been present.

Evidently, museums are cultural institutions that generate and profess their cultural policies through the practical tasks of pedagogy and collecting, exhibiting, researching and conserving the objects, or communication acts, which they value. Indeed, each of these tasks for which the museum is internally responsible, is also translatable as a social statement, directed externally to the museum’s immediate, localised audience or market as well as to a more or less remote sense of community. That community may be geographically or historically identified: as a nation-state; as an ethnic tradition, as a discipline of scholarship, and so on. It is becoming increasingly common for the cultural identities of many Australians, rather than fixed, inherited or class-based, to be
selected as part of a range of 'lifestyle' possibilities — opening up multiple identities and new sites of political expression — and this, too, has new implications for the diverse sets of relationships that museums are increasingly entering into. Cultural identity is a complex site of potentially antagonistic articulations in the public sphere, and many of these articulations find expression in the contemporary museum.

Certainly, a museum is for all intents and purposes a public space — notionally accessible to all (especially in the absence of entry fees, as is becoming more common in Australia). It could be said that the museum is one of the few public spaces in contemporary society which could provide opportunities for informed debate, leading to the communicative action that Habermas has posited as a goal of a truly democratic society. While Habermas's discourse concerned written communication, the same debates can potentially occur in the context of exhibitions and collecting practices, taking them into the realm of material public space. Museums are increasingly making issues of public concern the subject of exhibitions and of collecting and offering opportunities for debate around these issues. Can, therefore, the museum's social statements, its communication acts, be the focus for a genuine public discourse? As a receptacle for knowledge, however much in dispute or reevaluation, it may contain the possibility for the discursive arena which Habermas and others have been seeking. Notably, there has been considerable recent rhetoric (as will be seen in chapter three) in both Australia and elsewhere about the potential of the museum as a forum for an active and engaged society.

As Geoff Mulgan has noted, in political discourses of the 1980s,

the popular imagination of the Left is filled with images of public city life, with speakers on street corners, assertive crowds, soap boxes and

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barricades. Yet it is precisely this kind of public life that now seems to be withering as public spaces are privatised for retailing developments and as other activities relocate to the home...[the] cultural roots of democratic, public life are under threat...what is changed is the nature of the social or public experience. The public is no longer, [sic] but rather comes to be composed of a myriad of small groups and of the spaces, described by Sharon Zukin as 'liminal’, that lie between the public and the private, spaces like the apparently public piazza of a private office development, the street of a private housing development, the club that replaces the pub.49

The contemporary museum seeks to provide an alternative, a threshold from which the users of these liminal spaces might access broader and more freely democratic communication – for the museum to become what anthropologist James Clifford calls ‘contact zones’50 or to be the site of Habermas' communicative action. A ‘forum’ (as in Dawn Casey’s comments), for exchange of ideas, information and attitudes – this new model of a museum has generated heated discussion from both supporters and opponents alike. In recent years both the National Gallery of Australia and the National Museum of Australia have formulated policies which incorporate the ‘forum’ in their conception of their institutional roles. This will be examined in chapters two and six. First, however, given that definitions have been the subject of much debate, it is timely to ask ‘what is a museum’?

Defining the ‘modern’ museum and the ‘new’ museum

Modernity is a concept which embodies a break with the past and represents rapid and turbulent change along with the collapse of traditional beliefs and a new faith in social and industrial progress, creating mobile societies and perpetual change.\(^\text{51}\) It arose from the eighteenth century European Enlightenment in which the force of reason was considered to supplant old beliefs in superstition and religion and to create new, more democratic, political regimes. Modernity is inextricably linked to the paradigms of nation and nationalism, representing, as Anthony Smith suggested, a “bridge” between past and future, between the specific heritage... of each community... and the growing exigencies of a modern and increasingly industrialised nation...\(^\text{52}\) In the museum, modernity is expressed in its adherence to the principles of rationality inherent in ‘scientific’ disciplines such as history and art history, in the logical sequences of objects illustrating large narratives of progress, and in its classificatory and taxonomic regimes which dictate even the structural organisation of museum work and museum research. Yet these paradigms are being increasingly questioned.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM), which is the international non-governmental organisation of museums and professional museum workers,


associated with UNESCO (the United Nations Economic and Social Council),
defines a museum (c. 1989, revised 1995 and 2001) as:

A non-profit making permanent institution in
the service of society and of its development,
and open to the public, which acquires,
conserves, researches, communicates and
exhibits, for the purposes of study, education
and enjoyment, material evidence of people and
their environment.\(^{53}\)

This definition will be further analysed in chapter three, however, essentially it
subscribes to modern understandings of the functions of museums, taking into
account shifting emphases, that have been accepted by most museums for a
considerable part of the twentieth century. What it doesn’t say is that a museum
is also a site of considerable cultural authority and it will assume its cultural
authority according to how it performs certain professional responsibilities,
specifically the acquisition and care of objects, their valuation and the
communication of this value. In this sense the museum is a storehouse of
culture, whose role, while it educates, entertains and informs, is overwhelmingly
to select and preserve.

More precisely, these roles of the modern museum include: the custody and
preservation of the past; the authentication of the objects in its custody; the
valuation of those objects – in social, aesthetic, religious, political or scientific
terms (and increasingly in economic terms, especially for government accounting
purposes); the communication of the authority and value of those objects to
citizens of the society or community that maintains the museum, or more
precisely to particular social sectors; the acquisition and care of objects deemed
authentic and valuable by the museum; the representation of these activities as
an authentic and valuable component of culture; and the education, participation
and enjoyment of visitors to the museum.

These responsibilities also tend to identify museums with social or cultural history, regardless of their stated subject matter. Even when a museum may be dedicated to contemporary experience, this experience tends to have an already historicised structure to it. The museum, in its processes of selection and editing in exhibitions (and collections) is also a creator, as well as a disseminator, of the knowledge that governs social hierarchies.

Consider, then, some new ways of defining a museum and critiquing the 'modern' museum. Each of the following definitions suggests more than the museum's basic functional and pedagogical activities. They attempt to describe the very point or mission of a new museum. For example, (my emphases):

'Museums represent an organisational principle for the content of cultural memory and scientific knowledge' (Crane, S.A. [Ed.], 2000, Museums and Memory, Stanford University Press, p.2)

'... museums are essentially places in which objects—"real things"—are used as the principle means of communication'... 'centers of activity and discussion where the past and the present are inextricably mixed' (Hudson, K., 1998, The museum refuses to stand still' in Museum International, No. 197, Vol. 50, No. 1, p.46 and p.50)

'Museums perform their most fruitful public service by providing an educational experience in the broadest sense: by fostering the ability to live productively in a pluralistic society and to contribute to the resolution of the challenges we face as global citizens'... [no longer can museums] 'confine themselves simply to preservation, scholarship and exhibition independent of the social context in which they exist' [They must] 'help nurture a humane citizenry equipped to make informed choices in a democracy and to address the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly global society' (1992 American Association of Museums Report 'Excellence and Equity and the Public Dimension of Museums' cited in Cuno, J., 1997, 'Whose Money? Whose Power? Whose Art History?' in The Art Bulletin, Vol. 79, March, pp. 6 – 9)

'... an institution that can, through its public service orientation, use its very special competencies in dealing with objects to contribute positively to the quality of individual human lives and to enhance the well-being of human communities.' (Weil, S., 1999, 'The ongoing transformation of the American museum' in Daedalus, Vol. 28, No. 3, Summer, p. 23)

'Museums are places where people go to think and feel about what it means to be human'. (O'Neill, M. [unpub.] 1994 'Curating feelings: issues of identity in museums', cited in Kavanagh, G., 2000, Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum, Leicester University Press, p. 2)

'The museum is no longer the terminal for parcel post from history, art and culture; instead the institution becomes a flow-through and transformer station' (Emst, W., 2000, 'Archive textures of museology' in Crane, S.A. (ed.), 2000, Museums and Memory, Stanford University Press, p. 25)
New definitions such as these\textsuperscript{54} are being proposed to deal with an institution that is undergoing a period of rapid change, close examination and analysis. The range of ideas is evidence that the debate is far from over. Yet clearly the emphasis is now more firmly rooted in the relationships the museum has beyond its own collections and walls — to broad social issues and to increasingly articulate the demands and needs of its visitors. These definitions or propositions (which are essentially Eurocentric), reflect new attitudes to the use of knowledge and a considerably expanded view of the museum as a community resource and as a social space. As Peter Vergo has noted, the aim of writings on the new museology (and his edited volume in that name) was 'to induce a more reflective and critical attitude towards the wide range of activities in which museums engage.'\textsuperscript{55} Many of the ideas expressed under this rubric have, however, remained undeveloped. Thus they have operated as rhetoric, appealing to both reason and emotion, as persuasive ideas, but only partially or inadequately tested in practice.

Yet one question which this thesis seeks to answer is whether these propositions — which are, effectively, calls for new activity in museums — are more likely to be implemented in social history museums in Australia, whose very subject-matter already calls up these approaches, than by art museums, for which the strength of the art historical discipline appears to remain irresistible. The rhetoric that declares the museum a centre of cultural animation, a meeting place or intellectual laboratory, describes a goal that is as much sought after in Australian art museums as it is for social history museums. This will be explored further in later chapters.

\textsuperscript{54} All but one of these were used in 2001 by the Museums Australia Association to explore a new definition for Australian museums — see chapter three for the outcome of this discussion, and see Birtley, Margaret, 'A new definition of "Museum" ', at http://home.vicnet.net.au/~museaust/insite/ncmuseum.pdf. [Accessed: 8.12.2003].
Historically, the modern museum is not much more than two centuries old and is a product of the Enlightenment in late eighteenth century, post-revolutionary France, quickly taken up in England, Germany and the rest of Europe. While I don’t propose to describe the history of the museum in detail, it is useful to note the origins of the modern museum. From around the sixteenth century onwards in Europe, it was common for aristocrats and men of letters to amass collections of objects. These cabinets of curiosities, princely collections, preserving often diverse cultural and scientific artefacts, came to symbolise the wealth, leisure, power and, by analogy, the knowledge and taste of their owners. These collections were displayed for only a restricted few, those suitable elites who would fully appreciate the importance of the objects and their owner.56

But in the fervour of revolutionary France these collections came to be seen as examples of the extravagance and folly of the overthrown King and his aristocracy. Thus in 1793 the National Convention of the French Revolutionary Government ‘formally declared that the holdings in the Cabinet du Roi and the Cabinet d'Histoire Naturelle were no longer the property of the King but belonged to the entire French nation’. The creation of a museum meant that the hidden luxury and wealth of the King was now exposed, and once privileged knowledge now became communal or public property. Museums also became the means for the education and moral improvement of the middle classes — a genteel and civilising influence, and an important feature of civil society.

Over time museums consolidated their practices, moving from taxonomic coverage of their fields to more intensive research, particularly promoting connoisseurship (specifically the ability to authenticate an object) and then specialist knowledge. The emergence of modern museology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in relation to state supported academies advanced the project of rationalised collecting practices, preservation and education as key functions of museums. The emergence in the 19th century of new scholarly disciplines as 'sciences', such as history and art history, also influenced modern museology and their disciplinary practices became structurally entrenched in the work of the museum. For example, Kunstwissenschaft, academic art history, beginning in Germany with scholars like Wölfflin and Riegl, distinct from connoisseurship and initially not connected to the curatorship of collections, rapidly became the methodology for organising the display of art collections in museums.\(^{58}\) The division of works of art into schools, styles and historical periods was conventionalised as the means of understanding art. Though, as art historian Vernon Hyde Minor has pointed out, 'as art history became more professional and academic, more preoccupied with attributions, documentation, names, dates and periodisation, forces from outside the field never relented. The social, political, epistemological, and psychological implications for art attracted the interest of many, and not just art historians.'\(^{59}\) These interests have continued to transform the discipline, though its initial scholarly conventions have not entirely disappeared, particularly in the art museum. This will be investigated further in chapter five, as will shifts in historical practice from political to social history in chapters three and six.

(also described as the age of reason). This period was famously defined by Kant as ‘man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity’ – a linear or teleological view of history as inevitable and evolutionary progress. Theorists such as Habermas, Foucault and Lyotard have been sceptical of the supposed universality of its modern values, its so-called rationalism, and its grand explanatory narratives. These critiques have also influenced contemporary museology. Lyotard, for instance, questioned the legitimacy of the evolutionary narratives of history, proposing a shift to charting many little narratives, fragments, that subvert the naturalising of power by dominant groups. Lyotard referred to this shift as postmodernity, not in the sense of an historical period following on from modernity, but rather as a shift in the use and understanding of knowledge, replacing labour as a commodity since the late nineteenth century. Knowledge has become a commodity in the museum, creating tensions between its educational and social roles, and the museum’s participation in new market economies. Habermas’s public sphere relies on the ingredients of reason, rationality and equal participation. While the new museum attempts to expand its audiences, increase participation and debate, and open cultural practices up to wider experiences and beliefs, in sympathy with Habermas’s project, it also faces many tensions between its rhetoric of social activism, its reliance on modern practices of exhibiting and collecting, and its unequal relationship with government, bureaucracy and the imperatives of the market.

As art historian and critic Donald Preziosi has observed of the art museum, ‘modern practices of museology and art history are firmly rooted in a modernist ideology of representational adequacy, with exhibitions imagined to be more or less faithfully or truthfully representative of some set of extra museological affairs; some “real” history which, it is supposed, preexists its portrayal or representation in exhibitionary or discursive space...they therefore constitute a

example, beyond the “primitive”), and employing notions of difference, feminism, deconstruction and so on.
particular mode of fiction...[and] modernity itself is the supreme museological fiction.\textsuperscript{60} He calls museums ‘one of the premier epistemological technologies of the Enlightenment’ and says they ‘...have been constru(c)t( destructed as evidentiary and documentary artefacts; as instruments of historiographic practice.'\textsuperscript{62} Such critiques problematise the museum’s standard practices, which until now have been naturalised and thus rendered invisible.

Turning to the first Australian museums, it will be seen that they developed with British colonialist principles as their basis, but with a particular settler-society focus. I do not propose, here, to describe a history of museums in Australia, but simply to indicate their origins in both colonial discourses and European Enlightenment culture, as well as their subsequent engagement with the tropes of national culture.

The emergence of the ‘modern’ museum in Australia

Throughout the nineteenth century museums became increasingly popular and new ones were established throughout Europe and its colonies. For example, the National Gallery in London opened in 1824, and, as a group of British colonies, Australia didn’t lag far behind, establishing amongst others, the Australian Museum in Sydney in 1827, the National Museum of Victoria in 1854, and the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in 1861, all with the assistance of various government grants. These institutions took on their own colonial imperatives as part of a settler-society – creating narratives of progress for the colonies, and ways to understand this new ‘foreign’ environment and claim it for their own.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{60} Kant, Immanuel, 1784, ‘An Answer to the Question; ‘What is Enlightenment?’’, Konigsberg, Prussia, 30 September, in http://eserver.org/philosophy/kant/what-is-enlightenment.txt [Accessed: 2.4.2004], no pagination.


\textsuperscript{62} ibid.

The National Gallery of Australia was mooted in 1912, as was the National Museum, but only entered Parliamentary debate in any vigorous way in 1965. It took another six years before any significant funding allowed the development of a collection. The National Gallery Act of 1975 established the then named Australian National Gallery as a legal entity, although it was an entity without a building and without a public image.

However, this was not the first so-called ‘national’ collection in Australia. In the nineteenth century Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane each had institutions for collecting art and natural history that were titled or at least considered to be ‘national’ in their mission or in their scope. The Australian Museum, a name it holds to this day, opened in Sydney in 1827. As already noted, the National Museum of Victoria opened in 1854, the National Gallery of Victoria in 1861, the National Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1874 and the National Gallery of South Australia in 1879. Numerous other institutions - equally proclaiming national significance – appeared in other states: the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1838; the Queensland Museum in 1855; the South Australian Museum in 1856; the Science Museum of Victoria in 1870; the Western Australian Art Gallery, as part of the Perth Museum, and the Queensland Art Gallery, both in 1895.

Each of these institutions competitively considered themselves to be national, even though, in the nineteenth century, there wasn’t an Australian nation - at least as a political entity. Each saw their role as their individual colony’s representative and peak museum in their discipline. Until Federation the states were still separate colonies and inter-colonial rivalries fed the growth of collecting institutions and their claims to national status. For instance, the National Museum of Victoria’s first Zoologist, William Blandowski, referring to

the rapid growth of the museum's collections, noted that 'we have no reason to
be ashamed of the progress made when a comparison is drawn with the
museums of our sister colonies'64.

After Federation these museums and galleries became officially state institutions,
but many still tenaciously held on to their anachronistic national titles well into
the twentieth century, especially given the decades of delay in creating some of
the national collecting institutions in the new capital Canberra. The Art Gallery
of New South Wales preserved its 'national' pedigree until 1958, the Art Gallery
of South Australia until 1968. The National Gallery of Victoria, however, still
proudly maintains its nineteenth century title.

In the vacuum left by Commonwealth inactivity on the development of national
institutions, national significance continued to be contestable after Federation in
1901. National collecting was intermittent and had only a limited focus. The
Historic Memorials Committee, inaugurated in 1911 by the Commonwealth
Government, started a collection of portraits intended for future national
collections and sites of national authority (such as Parliamentary offices). The
Commonwealth Government continued its activities in museum collecting with
the Institute of Anatomy in 1924, in 1925 with the Australian War Memorial,
and in the 1920s, the Historic Memorials Committee had a relationship with the
Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board, established to further develop collections
of art.65 The various state collections continued to develop, albeit without vast
resources (except for the National Gallery of Victoria which had the Felton
Bequest, giving it a substantial capacity to purchase overseas, as well as in
Australia).

64 Quoted in Pescott, R.T.M., 1954, Collections of a century: The History of the First Hundred
Years of the National Museum of Victoria, National Museum of Victoria, p. 7.
role in the Australian art world, thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Department of Art History, Australian National University,
Canberra.
The earliest museums in Australia primarily held collections of natural history. Historian Tom Griffiths has described them as 'the proving grounds of nationhood' and 'beachheads for international scientific enquiry'. They collected examples of the flora, fauna, geological and fossil record of Australia and attempted an encyclopaedic coverage - investigating, designating, categorising and recording botanical, biological, topographic, geological and eventually (for example, not until the 1890s in the National Museum of Victoria) ethnographic specimens, in the spirit of nineteenth century imperialist discovery. Initially seen as evolutionary oddities, descriptions of Australian native flora and fauna produced an exotic imagining of Australia in response to British scientific vision. Many natural history specimens collected by museums were sent back to Britain, but often received international specimens in exchange, such as the three mounted gorillas from Central Africa obtained by Professor McCoy for the National Museum of Victoria in 1865, which were considered important to late nineteenth century studies of evolution. They participated in the scientific debates of the time. The importance of these collections of natural history however (with the Sydney and Melbourne museums leading the way) was not only in their value to the increasing scientific record of Australia (and the world), particularly given the unique qualities of the Australian continent, but also in an economic context. The Australian colonies, initially seen as agriculturally barren, had huge resources of geological and mineral wealth that could be harnessed for trade and industry as well as for the construction of new buildings. The gold discoveries of the 1850s were just one aspect of these economic advantages. Museum collections, assisted by geographic exploration and their own extensive field work, were able to provide knowledge of the land to enable its economic exploitation. In 1855 Captain Andrew Clarke, an English army officer and one of the National Museum of Victoria’s founders, remarked that the museum ‘is not to be a mere collection of curiosities...I hope to see in that museum a

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complete collection of all the ores that are useful, of all the woods that are suitable for shipbuilding, for roads and for tramways…a large assortment of all stones that can be usefully adapted to architecture…I desire to see the museum filled with all those objects that are peculiarly valuable in a new country…

Natural history museums produced an imaginary Australia, as did the art museums. The museum – by its very existence, as well as by the nature of its collections – symbolised the triumph of civilisation and progress in the colonies. At the same time as the unique features of Australia were 'discovered' and incorporated into the European scientific and cultural canons, there was a gradual process of identification with it by the settler-society. While considered to have no history, except by way of its connection with Europe and specifically Britain, an Australian character was being created, through visual arts, literature, scientific research and the celebration of an apparent resilience and courage believed required to 'make a go' of the place. New visions of the country, through the experiences of travellers, explorers, settlers, scientists and artists were revealed in the museums, albeit in a European framework. Gradually the Indigenous inhabitants either disappeared from these visions (in art, for example), or became part of a romanticised past. In the natural history museums they were presented, not only as part of nature, but as a rapidly disappearing part of it, in an apparently inevitable and evolutionary progression.

By the early twentieth century many museums in Australia were struggling to house, add to or even maintain their increasing collections. Wars and Depression did nothing to improve their circumstances. Some exhibitions in the National Museum of Victoria had had a life of over fifty years and it wasn’t until 1944 that

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the Museum had its own Board of Trustees, shared up until then with the National Gallery of Victoria, which attracted the greatest interest in its affairs.

Right up to the late 1950s Australia still looked to Britain and Europe for its cultural leadership and inspiration. In 1949, Kenneth Clark, the renowned English art historian and curator, gave a lecture at the National Gallery of Victoria titled ‘The Idea of a Great Gallery’. In it he spoke of the dangers of state-supported galleries in claiming to be scientific, in the sense of their educational purpose to teach something of art history. His complaint was that the ‘exalted happiness’ produced by a work of art was ‘lost sight of’. ‘The picture gallery’ he declared ‘is...an inherently artificial form, and must itself have the character of a work of art.’ Clark approved the efforts of the NGV to amass a collection of European masters, declaring their courage in buying, for example, works by Poussin, Tiepolo and Manet. His comments, whilst conscious of the complicity of the art museum in the creation of art historical truths, drew on the idea of the art museum as morally and spiritually uplifting and reminded his Melbourne audience of the museum’s important civilising function. He ended his lecture thus:

In this country, where the standard of physical life is so much higher than in the rest of the world, there may be a danger that the life of the spirit and of the imagination will be allowed to languish. It is at these moments that we must seek as our guides the great poets and artists of the past, and follow them as Dante follows the guidance of Virgil, in Blake’s sublime drawings. This is the illumination which it is the first function of a great gallery to provide.\(^{73}\) The youth of the Australian nation (as opposed to the continent and its first inhabitants) was still, even post World War Two, something to be tamed and civilised.


\(^{73}\) ibid, p. 18.
Similarly, on the occasion of the centenary of the National Museum of Victoria in 1954, the Chairman of Trustees, Sir Russell Grimwade, noted that 'there are both duties and obligations upon those of a civilised people who, for their own or their country’s advantage, enter a strange and almost empty land...the thoughtful man in a new country like this, then becomes aware of his obligations to his successors and realises that his coming to a new land may cause permanent changes in his environment...in no other country, therefore, does the responsibility of preserving a knowledge of the past rest quite so heavily upon its people.' The task of the museum in Australia, right up until the late 1970s and early 1980s, was to provide a coherent account of national history, science and culture that ‘imagined’ the nation, both its internal and unified character and its representation on an international stage.

It wasn’t until the 1960s that new buildings or significant extensions were provided to, for example, the Art Gallery of NSW and the National Gallery of Victoria. Art museums continued from then on to attract new funding and government and community support, throughout the next few decades. They were increasingly seen as vibrant and interesting, taking up the challenge of rapidly changing temporary exhibitions, especially of contemporary art, and adopting a regular program of internationally curated ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions that attracted huge crowds. Museums of natural history (there were yet no museums of political or social history in Australia) languished by comparison, still seen as musty old relics of little relevance. But, as will be identified particularly in chapter three, they too took on the challenges of increasing visitation and making exhibits more relevant to broader communities. In the 1990s museums of natural history in Australia had transformed themselves.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified one of the major themes of this thesis as the changing nature of the museum in Australia, and the place of the museum in the public sphere, that place of common concern, which also includes a specifically cultural public sphere – a site in which identity is both forged and contested. By the cultural public sphere I mean that sphere incorporating both the production and consumption of culture and its institutions (particularly in the specific sense of objects produced by professional artists, writers, performers and so on, as well as in the more general anthropological sense of a society's modes and models of signification). While Habermas argues that art is too subjective as a focus for communicative action, I maintain that the museum should be seen as separate from its subjects of interest. One of the main questions of the thesis is whether the museum in Australia can be the site for a genuine public discourse. The period 1982 - 2003 represents a watershed for Australian museums. Enormously popular, yet contested sites, the museum, as an agent in the public sphere, faces the conflicting interests that Habermas identified – the intersection of the lifeworld and the system world. Moving from the rhetoric of a progressive colonial settler-society and as an educational and civilising institution whose cultural authority was largely unquestioned, the museum now faces an interrogation of its own tropes and fictions, both from within and without. This has particularly occurred in the last two decades in Australia, as increasingly global and market-centred cultural identities intersect with diverse cultural forms and discourses. Its activities of authentication, valuation and representation of objects identify the museum as a powerful creator of knowledge within ongoing social, cultural, economic and political hierarchies.

The modern project of the museum is not, however, simply being replaced with a 'post-modern' version. As will be seen in my case studies, the modern practices

of the museum are structurally embedded in it — in its daily practices, its professional identity, and its cultural values. The critical question facing the museum is to what extent it can match its new rhetoric with its naturalised modern values. The following chapters will document the changes in Australian museums and expose the critical tensions that have arisen. Finally, I will investigate the prospects for the future of museums in Australia and whether the rhetoric of the new museology can be realised.
The early years of the National Gallery of Australia -
a modernist superstructure.

The idea of a National Gallery in Australia was first officially raised in 1912, a belated outcome of the creation of the new nation a decade earlier, but its development was problematic and intermittent. Apart from inevitable periods of hiatus, due amongst other things to war and depression, its conception was contingent upon changing notions of the nation, modernity and provincialism. The Gallery project was inextricably linked to the development of Canberra as the national capital — a project that was itself bound up in complex political aspirations and false starts — and was enmeshed in debates about Australian identity, national character and national culture, and Australia's relationship to Britain. It is in this context that the National Gallery emerged, and which shaped its final appearance in 1982 and its first few years of operation until the Bicentenary of Federation in 1988.

With the emergence of a national art gallery, the question of what was Australian art (and, by extension, Australian culture) came to be asked ever more urgently. In the context of the earliest discussions of any future National Gallery, from
the early twentieth century on, there was no real sense of an Indigenous culture and artistic tradition. Early Australian art histories – William Moore’s *The Story of Australian Art* in 1934, Bernard Smith’s *Place, Taste and Tradition* in 1945 and *Australian Painting* in 1960, or even Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen’s *The Necessity of Australian Art: An essay about interpretation* in 1988 – all treated Australian art largely in terms of white-settler art. The issue of provincialism, a reliance on European, and particularly British, models of culture, was expressed in these studies, as was the inexorable move towards modernism. Indeed Bernard Smith described the exodus of Australian artists to Britain and Europe over many years as a regretfully necessary part of their development.\(^1\) If they were to emulate the canon of artistic modernism, they needed to find a way to leave their provincial status behind.\(^2\)

What did this mean for the development of the National Gallery? I will argue that, at its opening in 1982, the National Gallery represented the consummate but final cultural achievement in a period of cultural modernisation in Australia. Its manifestation was marked by ideas of nation and modernity, by the concept of social and industrial progress, mobility and perpetual growth. Its opening also marked the culmination of a period of museum practice in Australia dedicated to the acquisition, presentation and research of collections describing a modern national identity. As noted in the Introduction, this national identity was ultimately unitary, representing itself as independent in the international domain.\(^3\) The opening of the National Gallery could be considered, as

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\(^1\) Anthony D. Smith has said that for modernists ‘the culture of the modern nation is a mass, public, standardised culture’, though he suggests that this is ‘infused with the pre-modern historic culture of the dominant ethnic’. See Smith, Anthony D., *History, modernity and nationalism* Boswell, David & Evans, Jessica, 1999, *Representing the Nation: A Reader – Histories, heritage and museums*, London and New York, Routledge.


mentioned in the Introduction, an expression of the same sentiments of national pride that produced, throughout the 1970s, intense cultural interest in defining populist national characteristics and vernacular stereotypes as well as the definition of a national high culture.4

In this chapter I will, therefore, describe the nature of the NGA in 1982 as a modern institution, discuss the importance of its early years as the ultimate expression of a belief in modernism, progress and nationalist sentiment, and explore its origins in debates about the nation, national identity and provincialism.

This inquiry is thus concerned with the public statements of the National Gallery of Australia. These public statements, both formal, as in official reports and policies, and informal, as in the many activities undertaken by the Gallery, form a kind of genealogy (as Foucault would describe it) of the Gallery. In describing such a genealogy of the National Gallery in the cultural public sphere it is necessary to also look at its public record, reports of its planning and activities, and public debates around those plans and activities. These records reveal both the way the Gallery described itself in its own public statements and the way it was publicly represented by others. In this discussion, several critical tensions emerge: a commitment to artistic modernism (and to institutional modernity); provincialism; and Indigeneity (which will be dealt with in more detail in chapter four).


4 I am thinking here of the popular characterisations in 1970s Australian television and cinema, such as the image of the ocker in films like Don's Party (1976), Stork (1971), The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972) or the earlier They're a Weird Mob (1966). The 1970s also produced a series of films that portrayed ordinary Australians against a background of historical events, as strong, resilient characters, such as The Man From Snowy River (1976), The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978), Neighbours (1978) and Caddie (1976). Television miniseries such as Seven Little Australians (1972) and Against the Wind (1978) also celebrated 'typical' Australian characters.
Showcasing culture

At the opening of the Australian National Gallery in October 1982, the hang of the collection of International Art was the outcome of director James Mollison’s ‘landmarks’ policy. It was art history as spectacle, particularly in the sense of Bennett’s analysis of Foucault’s thoughts on the display of power. The ‘history’ of twentieth century international art was produced in the ‘big pictures’ of modernism, a chronological sequence of ‘moments’ in art history with a special emphasis on American art of the 1940s and 1950s, which had become a strength of the collection.

This sense of spectacle was evident even in the building itself. A massive, monumental, fortress-like edifice in bush-hammered concrete, it commands attention. Finding one’s way to the mid-level front door is not straightforward, though the prominent raised walkway linking the Gallery to the High Court

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5 As explained in the Introduction, known initially as the Australian National Gallery (ANG), the institution changed its name to National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in October 1982. As this thesis is concerned with the Gallery from its beginnings up to the present day, the Gallery will be referred to as the National Gallery throughout.

6 For Foucault, the ‘spectacle’ was historical – as seen in displays such as the public execution. Instead, he said, modern social relations were based on its reverse – surveillance, as demonstrated in the 19th century panopticon prison, designed to induce a self-regulating behaviour or performance. For a useful discussion of this concept of spectacle, see Bennett, Tony, 1999, ‘The exhibitionary complex’ in Boswell, David & Evans, Jessica (eds.) Representing the nation: A Reader, Routledge, pp 332 – 361, originally published in 1988, New Formations, no. 4, pp 73 –102. Bennett noted that, unlike Foucault’s self-regulating surveillance, public exhibition of objects that were once private came to publicly broadcast messages of power (of the prominence of social and cultural hierarchies), in a more nuanced fashion than Foucault had allowed.


8 Bush-hammered concrete has an exposed aggregate finish, obtained by removing the surface cement using a percussive hammer with a serrated face. It adds texture and visual interest to walls, and in the NGA, reflects the philosophy of architect Col Madigan, who believed that concrete has as much integrity as stone. However, a by-product of the finish is that it can produce dust, which became an issue in the NGA when some staff and the media generally, declared the building a health hazard. See Janet Hughes and Steve Hennessy, 2001, ‘Clearing the Air: Communicating Air Quality Issues to Museum Staff and Responding to External Accusations at the National Gallery of Australia’, presentation with slides to IAP Copenhagen, 4th meeting of the Indoor Air Pollution Working Group, www.iaq.dk/iap/iap2001/2001_08_2.htm [Accessed: 1.11.2005].
reads like a bridge spanning a castle moat and powerfully suggests the importance of the site. Structurally it is well within the tradition of the modern museum as a secular temple. Its external monumentality is mirrored internally, especially in the foyer, with its towering ceilings, raw concrete walls, and even a giant steel portcullis that closes off the first gallery space after hours. One cannot doubt that it is a place of high culture, physically meant to inspire aesthetic appreciation and awe. Its location in the zone known as the ‘Parliamentary Triangle’, an area housing the monuments of the nation – at the time including Parliament House, the National Library, High Court, Treasury and certain government offices – reinforces its authority.

NGA Introductory Gallery, 1983

I was a member of staff at the National Gallery (in Education) from 1983 – 1987, so this description is from my own experience working in the building and seeing visitor responses to it. Similarly, the descriptions of the first exhibition hangs are from my own experience (I worked in the exhibition spaces nearly every day.)
In 1982, visitors (77% of whom came from interstate or overseas) entered the first, and cavernous, exhibition space on the entry level to encounter a small collection of International works of art. Included were a fifteenth century Italian Crucifixion, an eighteenth century Tiepolo ceiling painting (hung on the wall), Monet’s *Haystacks at Noon*, 1890, and *Waterlilies*, c. 1910 – 1920, a large 1850s oil study by Courbet, a Fred Williams landscape triptych, a Lake Sentani double figure housepost that was once in the collection of artist Jacob Epstein, and a collection of Pre-Columbian sculpture and pottery. Two Aboriginal bark paintings from Arnhem Land were hung at the entrance to the gallery, an important symbolic gesture. These served as a kind of introductory gallery, as well as an historical preamble to the collection of twentieth century art to be found in the next gallery. Here one encountered a group of works representing, in a rough chronology, some of the major art movements in twentieth century art – very much attempting the story of modern art as told by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and its influential founding Director Alfred Barr in the 1930s and early 1940s and which has left a dominating legacy on art museum interpretations ever since. Barr championed European modernism, though never gave much credence to the generations of American modernist artists, including abstract expressionists such as Pollock and Gorky. The National Gallery has departed from Barr in collecting these artists extensively. The Gallery’s displays continued right up to the 1960s and 1970s, incorporating Warhol, Bacon, Beuys and Christo. Nonetheless, Barr’s approach – grouping works in terms of ‘movements’ or ‘isms’ – was embedded in the National Gallery hang.

In addition to the ‘core’ display, a photography gallery was opened on the entry level, which included changing exhibitions of both Australian and International Photography. There were also exhibitions of Theatre Arts and Asian textiles.

The lower ground floor held a special sculpture gallery, including two of Brancusi's *Bird in Space*, and a special exhibition called *Paperwork*\textsuperscript{12}, the inaugural exhibition of the Department of International Prints and Illustrated Books. A selection of works drawn from the Gallery's own collection, it showed the variety of media and approaches that artists from Gauguin to Hockney have used in the production of original prints. This exhibition set the standard for many of the Gallery's subsequent temporary exhibitions. Using the collection, generally without loans, researched and generated by Gallery staff, the National Gallery quickly established itself as an important centre of original research.

The upper floors contained the collection of Australian art, in a space altogether different. Lower ceilings made it far less monumental (almost domestic in scale) and the linear sequence of spaces already dictated a chronological hang. The collection was considered by curators to have many 'gaps' and, unlike state galleries at the time, Senior Curator Daniel Thomas decided to incorporate works of decorative art, prints and drawings, along with painting and sculpture, in the hang.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Gilmour, Pat and Willsford, Anne, 1982, *Paperwork*, exhibition catalogue, Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

Mollison claimed that the Australian collection had in fact provided an alternative story of and take on Australian art. Perhaps what some might call an extravagant claim, this was really a reference to having a collection which did not incorporate the iconic works that had already been part of written histories of Australian art. Instead, and curiously unlike the efforts of the international collection, it was unable to tell a story with conventionally accepted high points and was thus forced to accept a reading that included apparent disjunctions and u-turns. Many works were on loan – a lot of early colonial art came from the National Library of Australia, some early twentieth century barks from the National Museum of Victoria and other works from collections around the world. In the 1982-83 Annual Report James Mollison's remarks are worth quoting at length:

Favourable historical accident accounts for the unusually large representation of the nation's own art in the Gallery. It was once assumed that the Gallery would be devoted to Australian art alone, and that Australia could never hope for a National
Gallery displaying art drawn from all the world’s cultures. That early lack of confidence and the consequent accumulation in the 1960s and early 1970s of Australian national material turns out to have been a happy accident, resulting in a National Gallery which is strikingly different from others throughout the world...

though he added that it would be necessary to continue to borrow works of colonial art, saying

loans from other collections...will always remain necessary if the Gallery is to display Australian art systematically, for the first period of European contact with Australia produced few works of art that are not already in other public collections.14

This apparent need to display Australian art ‘systematically’ clearly rested on a belief that there was a singular story to be told and that, at the time, other public collections had the advantage in owning the works which had been deemed central to the story.15 However, it was public galleries, through their purchases, that had created that story in the first place. This wasn’t questioned. It was simply seen as an impediment – that the Gallery had to work harder to recreate the ‘same’ story through other (lesser?) works or subsidiary media, not through the ‘highest’ expression of painting on canvas.

The ‘story’ did begin to change however. The collecting, in earnest, of Aboriginal Art, began in 1983, with the first purchases of acrylic paintings from Papunya. This was a significant shift in the valuing of Aboriginal art, which until then had been seen more as ethnography than art. Similarly, the beginning of a collection of South East Asian textiles (unlike conventional collections of Asian art which primarily focused on the ‘high’ arts of Japan, China and India) was

subtly influencing attitudes. This signalled a shift in ways of valuing and interpreting different cultures that I will deal with more extensively in chapter four.

Aside from some 1960s purchases, the collection grew very quickly, and was largely built up in around a decade prior to opening, with the help of considerable and consistent funding from the Federal Government. The stress was on its being a ‘national’ collection, reinforcing its special status. The funding was greater than that available to state galleries, but then the Gallery was trying to create a substantial collection in a very short period of time, something it achieved remarkably successfully.

Before long the Gallery began to host major temporary exhibitions. In September 1983, the Gallery hosted the ICCA (International Cultural Corporation of Australia) touring exhibition *The Entombed Warriors*. It attracted higher attendances than at other tour venues in Australia, but was only on show for four weeks and made little impact on Gallery programs, attracting few special events. However, the following year, the Gallery held the highly successful exhibition *The Great Impressionists*, masterpieces from the Courtauld collection of the University of London. Organised by direct negotiations between the Gallery and the Courtauld Institute, and shown only in Canberra, it attracted record crowds. It established a precedent for regularly having major exhibitions (what had come to be known as ‘blockbusters’, for their effect on visitor numbers and the resulting queues). The Gallery decided to hold no more than one every

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16 Curatorial choices were now focusing on the arts of Australia's nearest Asian neighbours and included the traditional arts practiced in villages and towns for centuries, no longer the art of the court.

17 See Appendix D.

18 *The Entombed Warriors* was the first 'blockbuster' held at the NGA, in September 1983. From the Peoples Republic of China, it included a selection of the 1974 archaeological discoveries of around 6,000 ancient terracotta soldiers and their horses, that had been buried in the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi (259 - 210 BC). Qin ordered that a massive clay army be created to guard his tomb and accompany him to the afterlife.


eighteen months, given that the workload on staff in planning and preparation was enormous, and that it was necessary to remove parts of the regular hang to accommodate these shows. Meantime, *Twentieth Century Masters* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was held in 1986, and in 1987, *Old Masters, New Visions*, from the Phillips collection in Washington DC. Both these exhibitions were developed and managed by the National Gallery itself and brought many new visitors, especially from interstate.21

There was no large temporary exhibition space in the building, which was essentially designed with only permanent collections in mind. However, this style of major temporary exhibition was increasingly beginning to change the way all art museums operated, not just the National Gallery. They attracted not only huge crowds, but also were revenue-raising opportunities for institutions whose costs were rising due to several factors, including a bullish art market, increased conservation storage and staff costs, to name a few. Moreover, government funding was not increasing at the same rate (a world-wide experience) and art museums needed to find new ways of adding to their budgets. Opportunities for product development and marketing presented themselves with these shows. Pressure thus began to build on the Gallery re the need for a permanent space for major exhibitions.

By 1987-88, 30% of the total Gallery income was raised off-budget, through attracting corporate and individual sponsorships.22 To attract corporate philanthropy, and to ensure that staff were not diverted from the core functions of acquisition, research, conservation, exhibition and interpretation, a separate fund-raising arm of the Gallery was established in September 1987. Called the Australian National Gallery Foundation, it set out to raise an $8 million capital

fund for acquisitions, and an additional $5 million in the following five years for other programs. Similarly, AFANG (American Friends of the Australian National Gallery) aimed to foster opportunities for American philanthropy. Eventually, in 1989, the government review of the Gallery suggested that all entrepreneurial activities should be treated on a 'commercially viable basis' and consideration should be given to devolving them all to the Foundation in the belief that 'separating all the Gallery's money making activities (excluding entrance fees) from its core heritage functions would facilitate the focusing on clear objectives. It would force the Gallery to establish funding targets and strategies to meet them. It would also impose a commercial test on decisions which are sometimes currently made on an ad hoc basis.' This was the accepted wisdom in government at the time, but failed to take account of the many 'public good' benefits that might accrue aside from the commercial opportunity. Separating commercial activity from other functions would, by the creation of diverse aims and objectives, have simply ensured the potential for conflicts of interest.

From July 1985, exhibitions of contemporary art were held at the Drill Hall

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Gallery, on the edge of the Australian National University campus. Rather than disrupt permanent collection installations, and given the lack of a dedicated temporary exhibition space, it was, perhaps, a necessary move, allowing a continuing program of ‘avant-garde’ or ‘difficult’ art. (The university had offered the Drill Hall following the success of two popular National Gallery exhibitions at ANU’s Melville Hall, including *A Melbourne Mood: Cool Contemporary Art*.) This was an important facility, ensuring that the Gallery continued to present public exhibitions of contemporary art. However, the removal of contemporary art off-site required a special excursion for the visitor and meant that many who visited the main building, and might normally be exposed to contemporary art for the first time, missed out. Additionally, it could not be viewed in the ‘light’ of the rest of the permanent collection – a departure from the art historical desire to view western art as a series of avant-garde moments, each supplanting the last. Perhaps this allowed a freedom from the constraints of conventional art museum display, though the range of exhibitions, while exciting, remained firmly within museum style. Exhibitions were drawn from the collection, and while contemporary work was purchased on the premise that it might not stay in the collection (that it needed to stand the test of time), it took on the mantle of institutional approval. Thus the Drill Hall existed as a satellite space, an annex, and essentially maintained the formal spirit of the main site.

Travelling exhibitions, which had been the means for the Gallery to promote itself prior to opening and which were largely composed of highlights of the collection, were put on hold from 1982. The focus was on the exhibitions within the building and an extensive outward loans program, until it was decided to tour an exhibition of Arthur Boyd’s work in 1986. The following year, a three year pilot travelling exhibitions program was instituted which began an extensive touring schedule around regional areas of Australia and attempted to respond to the needs and interests of the regions. At the time it was planned to have three

26 *Australian National Gallery Annual Report 1985-86*, Canberra, ANG.
27 For example, *Genesis of a Gallery* I and *Genesis of a Gallery* II.
exhibitions on the road at any one time. By 1990, and under pressure from the
Government to continue this program, it became a permanent feature of Gallery
operations. In fact, in 1989, the Ministerial Review of the Gallery had noted
that it was important to continue this program, and that 'the ANG was never
envisaged as an isolated institution in Canberra. During the Second Reading
debate (for the National Gallery Act, 1975), speakers from both sides of
Parliament drew attention to the need for an outward looking outreach program
including, in particular, travelling exhibitions throughout Australia...'

One of the early strengths of the Gallery was its high professional standards.
From a properly established conservation department to a computerised
collection management system, its collections records were extensive and
thorough. Collection research was highly valued and staff regularly contributed
original material to in-house and external publications. Everything from art
handling to exhibition design and the positioning of labels on walls was subject
to strict guidelines aimed at achieving the best levels in aesthetics, care of works,
access to information, and the general good appearance of the Gallery. While
these were accepted standards in the international museum held, they had not
always been given priority in other Australian institutions, whereas the National
Gallery set new benchmarks for the industry in Australia.

Equally, its Education and Public Programs staff established a strong reputation
for a high level of service. All students visiting the Gallery received personalised
services, varying from a simple welcome and introduction, to extensive tours
(usually a minimum of one hour) that could be tailored to meet the specific
needs of teachers. Resource materials were published regularly, including slide

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28 Interview with Alison French, who worked in the Gallery's Education Department from 1982
and became Head of Travelling Exhibitions in 1987, 17 February 2005.
29 Early, Gerard, 1989, Review of the Australian National Gallery: A Report to the Minister for
the Arts and Territories, Parliament House, Canberra, February, p. 49.
30 Reeder, Warwick, 2003, 'The Rise of Registration in the House Under Construction', in Green,
Pauline (ed.) Building the Collection, National Gallery of Australia, p. 44; and Early, Gerard,
1989, Review of the Australian National Gallery: A report to the Minister for the Arts and
Footnote continues overleaf
kits, education brochures on specific exhibitions, audio-visuals and pre- and post-visit material for teachers. In these first years Terence Measham, who had been recruited from the Tate Gallery in London, and who built upon the services that had been offered at the Tate, ran the Education section. Staff also gave regular lectures, slide talks in the two theatres, or lectures in front of works of art in the exhibition spaces. The daily lunchtime lectures, begun in 1982, were to gather a devoted following among office workers in nearby buildings, as well as members of the Gallery Association, general visitors, and the volunteer guides. It wasn't uncommon in the first years for lectures in front of works like Blue Poles to attract audiences of over 100, eager to understand what made the painting so special. Similarly, the Members Association organised more than social events. Visits to artists' studios, overnight tours to places of cultural interest, behind-the-scenes visits, and opportunities to meet and talk with curators about current exhibitions were regular events. These activities remained largely connected to the commercial enterprise of the Gallery however. Limiting them to Members ensured a paying and loyal audience.31

Initially the Education staff planned to conduct practical art programs in the adaptable studio space behind the walls in Gallery Four, upstairs in Australian art. Here the art could be removed, a Pirelli rubber floor rolled out, and walls could be lifted, like screens, to reveal sinks, benches, storage and other accoutrements of art-making. However, it became unavailable as the needs of an expanding exhibition program quickly swallowed up any capacity to book the use of the space. Priorities were the collection and its exhibition. Interpretation was valued, but secondary.

Nevertheless the Education section was active in developing education exhibitions, from glass cases on 'materials of art' to larger exhibitions for

Territories, Canberra, Office of the Minister for the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, p. 42.
children, such as Artzoo and Eyespy (which became an ongoing series). Voluntary guides went through an exhaustive selection process, and received a full year's training within the Education section, including exams, before they were allowed to guide visitors. Guides, in these years, were not allowed to lead tours of school students, as it was considered that staff with formal teacher training would be better qualified to understand the special needs of school groups. In other words, museum education became a more specialised and professionalised field. This was consistent with the professionalism being promoted, particularly by Mollison, throughout the Gallery, ensuring that it was received as the premier institution in Australia. Like the interest in building a collection to rival, at least in quality, those of New York and London, all Gallery programs were required to be the exemplary measure of contemporary peak practice in museums.32

Representative Collections and Representational Adequacy

It is a rare thing for a major public collection to be developed in such a short period of time. As such, it relied heavily on the personal vision of Director James Mollison. His was a vision directed at new horizons – particularly the USA – and one that dared to imagine a twentieth century collection that could rival world class institutions. Mollison squarely placed the National Gallery on the world art museum map. It was not an easy achievement.

In 1971, both the final design for the Gallery was approved and James Mollison was announced as Acting Director. Mollison had worked as a high school teacher and for a period in the Education section of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). He had been Director of Gallery A in Melbourne (a commercial gallery promoting contemporary art) and the Ballarat Art Gallery,

32 Interview with Alison French, 17 February, 2005.
before becoming, in 1968, Exhibitions Officer of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, recommending its Australian acquisitions. His background was different from that of many European gallery directors and certainly epitomises the social mobility sometimes available in Australia. He was not an art history graduate, but had developed his skills on the job, absorbing the art around him in a catholic fashion, including writing about Renaissance art in the NGV in 1962 while working in its education department.

Mollison's acquisitions policy, as revealed in a 1977 interview with journalist Geraldine Pascall, was to include:

...an exemplary collection of Australian art: another collection that ranges from black Africa through the Pacific to pre-Columbian America, that will admit the gallery's presence in the southern hemisphere; an Asian and South Asian collection which will establish it geographically and – as a sign that we're an outpost of western civilisation [my emphasis] – a small background collection of great single items, each one as representative as possible of a particular art style.33

These 'landmark' works (Mollison's term) were to include roughly 20 – 30 items to cover the period of western art from antiquity to 1850 and 30 for the period from 1850 to 1950. This decision to purchase just a few representative works from these periods was justified by pointing out that fewer works from these times remained in private hands and were also prohibitively expensive. Mollison's comment, as 'an outpost of western civilisation', seemed to suggest that it was necessary for Australia to have a visual reminder of our colonial inheritance, that to which we might aspire. The international collection from 1950 onwards would be more comprehensive because it would be easier to build a large holding in this area. In these early years he was solely responsible for purchasing, with the assistance of overseas advisors, based in London and the USA. His purchasing especially emphasised American art. Up till the early 1970s,

33 Pascall, Geraldine, 1977, 'I only know one way to go about it'. Interview with James Mollison. In The Australian, 3 March.
Australian artists had looked to Europe and Britain for evidence of contemporary international artistic trends, even after the international centre of the art world was generally considered to be New York. So when Mollison began to look in this direction it actually seemed a very avant-garde move compared to what Australians had been used to looking at.

The interviewer went on to note:

To arguments that his plan is too eclectic, he says that it must be eclectic, even eccentric, in the first years until the patterns emerge [my emphasis] — "but working with that material day in and day out, I can see the patterns". Arguments that the gallery should concentrate on one thing or perhaps two, he condemns with that word, parochial. And anyway, there are already big or small great collections of Australian art in State galleries.

Here Mollison was simply reiterating previously expressed attitudes to Australian collections. Back in 1965 the biggest problem facing the Menzies-appointed National Gallery Committee of Inquiry was perceived as that of the Commonwealth being a late starter in developing a good collection. How were they to develop as fine a collection of Australian art as the state galleries? In August 1965, the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board had already compiled some preliminary notes for discussion of a National Art Gallery in Canberra, and many earlier ideas resurfaced. The notes stated that 'the present buying policy is directed towards acquiring Australian works, perhaps with consideration for a future gallery? Amongst its suggestions for future policy was that the Gallery should have a collection which shows the development of

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35 Pascall, Geraldine, 1977, 'I only know one way to go about it'. Interview with James Mollison. In The Australian, 3 March.
36 Author unknown. National Art Gallery for Canberra: Preliminary Notes for Discussion by Art Advisory Board, 11th August, 1965, in Tas Drysdale's papers, as member of National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry, collection of Mary Eagle, Canberra. Papers were circulated to Committee members for consideration.
Australian art in its historic context. This was considered difficult as again it was declared that 'most of the “key” Australian historic paintings are now in public collections' and it was thus suggested that perhaps the collection should be confined to contemporary Australian art only. Mollison did purchase contemporary Australian art, but his big leap was to pursue international art purchases, particularly from the USA. Some of these bold abstract works inevitably drew out the inherent conservatism of the popular media in Australia.

When a frenzied press took up the purchase of works like Jackson Pollock's 'Blue Poles' in 1973 and Willem de Kooning's 'Woman V' in 1974, Mollison found himself under vehement attack. In this now notorious period, Mollison and the Gallery had done little to prepare the Australian public for its adventurous and, for some, startling, program of acquisitions. The result was a period of extreme responses to purchases – headlines such as 'Drunks did it' (referring to 'Blue Poles') and exclamations like ‘ceiling’s the limit!’ (the Tiepolo) were commonplace – clearly intended to incite negative responses. The media regularly focused on the high prices paid for abstract work, virtually daring a conservative public to respond with predictable regularity about the perceived waste of money and to question whether there was any aesthetic or cultural value in such forms of art. It was also suggested in the media that overseas art dealers were taking the National Gallery, and consequently the Australian public, for a ride. Apart from impugning Mollison’s own knowledge of the art world, this also simply reinforced popular beliefs that modern art was a giant hoodwink and that it was only for elites, not the average Australian. This debate on acquisitions continued, sometimes acrimoniously, for some years. In 1975 the National Gallery Act included the proviso that the approval of the Minister was

38 ibid., p. 3.
39 Newspaper reports at the time were headlined with outraged statements, such as 1973, The Daily Mirror, a Sydney tabloid, which declared ‘$1mill. Aust. Masterpiece, Drunks did it!’, 23 October, 1974, The Age, Melbourne, 3 October, noted the purchase of Brancusi’s two marbles, each called Bird in Space, with the headline ‘we pay $1.3m for a brace of birds; the Tiepolo ceiling purchase was described as ‘ceiling’s the limit’ in the 1974, Sun, Sydney, 3 October; Willem de Kooning’s Woman V was greeted with the headline ‘another Blue Poles?’, 1974, Sunday Telegraph, Sydney, 29 September.
needed for the purchase of any works over $100,000. In 1977 Don Cameron, the Federal Member for Griffith, announced that the Gallery Council 'had agreed to his request that in future, prices paid for art purchased overseas will be disclosed'. He called 'the past practice of civil servants wandering the world seeking art with the tax payers' open cheque book... undesirable. It has harmed national acceptance of overseas art purchases.'

Government Minister Tony Staley (later to become Chair of the NMA Council, as will be discussed in chapter six) declared that 'the Government has a responsibility to ensure that Australia receives value for its acquisitions expenditure' and eventually a Secretary and Manager, Brendan Kelson, was appointed to the Gallery in September 1977, a position 'designed to underline this responsibility'. Similarly, an early 1977 Government directive, approved by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, compelled the Gallery to spend a significant portion of the acquisitions budget on Australian artists, and new guidelines for major purchases were introduced that required two appraisals from local or overseas experts who were unconnected to the Gallery. Gallery expertise was clearly suspect.

In this period several major potential purchases were not approved by government because of their prices. These included a 1907 work by Georges Braque called *Grand Nu or Nu Debout*, considered important to fill a Cubist gap.

40 Cameron, Don, MP, Federal Member for Griffith, 1977, 'Press Release', 26 May. It should be noted that the Gallery Council was clearly also being pulled into line, along with Mollison, suggesting that perhaps it was considered they had given him carte blanche. It may also have been a response by the new Liberal government under Malcolm Fraser to what was seen as the financial excesses of the Whitlam Labor government. By 1982/83 there was a Commonwealth public servant sitting on Council as an observer. See Appendix 1, for brief survey of Council membership.

41 Staley. The Hon. A.A., Minister for the Capital Territory and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister in the Arts, 1977, 'Australian National Gallery: Appointment of Secretary and Manager', Press Release, 2 September.

42 Staley. The Hon. A.A., Minister for the Capital Territory and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister in the Arts, 1977, 'Australian National Gallery: Appointment of Secretary and Manager', Press Release, 2 September.

43 McCarthy, Phillip, 1977, 'Liberals will check on art' in Age, 12 March.
in the modern international collection, and an ancient Greek bronze which eventually went to the Getty collection in Los Angeles. The Gallery was chastened and frustrated in its attempts to complete Mollison’s vision for the collection. Mollison responded to these defeats and debates at the National Press Club, admonishing journalists for pushing sensationalism when they could instead have played a critical and constructive role, educating both public and government in the field of the arts. His remarks are very revealing – and perhaps one of the clearest expressions of where he saw the place of the National Gallery. Declaring Australia ‘an outpost of Western culture’, Mollison called his hope for ‘landmark’ works up to 1850, and from 1850 to 1950, ‘two small background collections of Western Art’. He rejected press distortions, saying they ignored the majority of works that were ‘representative art, in some fields, such as Australian art, involving an exhaustive coverage’ and that they also ignored the Gallery’s ‘uncompromised excellence.’

Acknowledging the competitive art market, he said ‘we cannot now hope to build a large collection of works by the master artists. So we will build a small one, and given that limitation we must have the very best’. He hoped to be what he called the ‘near equal’, in quality rather than quantity, of places like the Metropolitan in New York or the National Gallery in London. He said:

Galleries exist for the study of the history of image and form, some moments in that history are landmarks, examples of those moments belong in galleries. There they are preserved from deterioration and are exposed to the general public whose artistic tradition they summarise. I make no apology for this role: it is a clearly defined one, and it is in a sense the axiom on which the concept of a gallery such as ours is based.

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45 Mollison, James, 1977, speech to National Press Club, Canberra, 30 August, (National Gallery ephemera files, with Mollison’s own hand-written amendments.), p. 1.
46 ibid., p. 2.
47 ibid., p. 4.
48 ibid.
The idea of artistic ‘excellence’, the cornerstone of Mollison’s approach, of course suggests a strict hierarchy of vision (or taste?) – an elite vision, in which all else is subordinated to the dedication to ‘high’ art. Mollison’s collection presented a canonical reading of artistic modernism. Having works like ‘Blue Poles’ in Australia meant that we would be able to understand what the canon was. Like a dictionary, Australia would finally be given the language of modernism, which it could now learn to speak in the international arena. Mollison’s words also remind us that this was a unitary Australian identity and culture that he referred to, summarising the artistic tradition for the general public, a public undifferentiated and undivided.

Mollison’s acquisition policy suggests you can tell the story of art in 30 major works – as Lyotard would say, it is a majestic narrative of western art that can be told in its monuments. Mollison declared that the story would be filled out with prints and smaller or subsidiary works (an artistic hierarchy itself). A grand story – Australia taking the world stage. With Mollison, we witnessed a surge of fantastic enthusiasm and vision. Yet one implication is that what he presented us with was spectacle, a display of the power and knowledge of cultural elites designed to instruct and affirm social and cultural hierarchies – not a representative conservative art history. In fact, a representative art history in the 1970s might have attempted to give more prominence to the questioning works of 1970s contemporary art.

49 Art history created a hierarchy of values in which painting and sculpture are considered to be the pre-eminent expressions of artistic vision, and the graphic arts (drawing, printmaking) are lesser forms. This has been challenged by the new art history – see for example Rees, A.L and Borzello, F. (eds.), 1986, The New Art History, Camden Press, London, in which assumptions about notions of genius and originality were challenged and art history was seen as linked to society and opened up to new interdisciplinary and cross-cultural practices.

50 See previous discussion, footnote 6, page 41, in which I discussed ‘spectacle’ and ‘surveillance’ and the use of ‘spectacle’ to reproduce social and cultural hierarchies. For a discussion of spectacle and Foucault see especially Bennett, Tony, ‘The exhibitionary complex’, in Boswell, David & Evans, Jessica (eds.) Representing the nation: A Reader, Routledge, pp 336 – 342, originally published in 1988, New Formations, no. 4, pp 73 –102.
This was a time when many artists in Australia and internationally were actively rejecting the circular link between the art object, the art market and the art museum. Producing ephemeral work that might elude the status of precious and marketable object, artists employed performance, fragile or temporary media, and even manipulated elements such as earth and water in outdoor non-art sites. Documentation, often photographic, was frequently the only remaining trace of a work (such as photographs of Christo’s *Wrapped Coast* project in Sydney in 1969, where he wrapped a section of coastline – Little Bay - in fabric). Yet art museums, ever able to convert radical gestures into just another part of the story (though it must be said often with the complicity of the inverted and reverted ambition of the artist), purchased and displayed these documents, turning them into the very art object that had ostensibly disappeared.

The National Gallery was certainly no exception to this. It purchased ephemeral work or documentation of it (including *Wrapped Coast*), but it became the story of art, rather than projecting any sense of radical rupture from it. It was almost breathtakingly seamless. Prior to opening, the Gallery presented its collection to the public in a series of travelling exhibitions, particularly the Genesis of a Gallery 1 and 11 shows. These presented a spectacle of art from around the world as well as Australia. They were presented as what in gallery parlance are termed ‘summation works’ – the highpoints of a period, a style or an individual artist’s oeuvre. They functioned to foster a secure belief and trust in the sophisticated knowledge that would be presented by the Gallery at opening. Given the great fuss over acquisitions it was important that the public accept that the spectacle was transcendent and eclipsed other Australian public collections.

Meanwhile, art world figures debated the issues in various forums, criticising the belief in ‘masterpieces’ and ‘treasure trove’ thinking in art museums and

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advocating an emphasis on collecting contemporary art. In 1977 Peter Tomory, then Chair of the Department of Art History at La Trobe University, observed in an Art Association seminar on public gallery acquisitions that:

we all know by now that the National Gallery in Canberra buys nothing else but 'masterpieces'. Every work a Snow White although there are some sceptics amongst us who suspect that some dwarfs have also crept in...Would anyone be satisfied with an overseas library's claim that one novel by Patrick White represented Australian 20th century novel writing.\textsuperscript{52}

The unfortunate reference to 'some dwarfs' suggests that Tomory did not actually dispute the existence of artistic hierarchies. Nevertheless, he went on to call this a 'frightening marriage of cultural cringe and national chauvinism. Art is international...Australia, if it does not take care, will present through its art museums an increasingly deplorable, narcissistic image of cultural elitism'.\textsuperscript{53}

Other participants in the seminar agreed. Lenton Parr, a sculptor, Director of the Victorian College of the Arts and a Trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria at the time, asked whether an art gallery is 'an agent of desirable cultural diffusion across boundaries of space and time or is it merely evidence of the parasitism of one culture on another?\textsuperscript{54} All felt that the purchase of contemporary Australian art should be the major focus. Nevertheless that year's National Gallery international purchase of Monet's 'Haystacks at Noon' went ahead, despite the fact that the year's budget for Australian art had already been exhausted.

\textsuperscript{52} Tomory, Peter, 1977, 'The acquisition policy from the inside out', in papers from Art Association of Australia seminar Australian Public Gallery Acquisition Policies, Melbourne, 28 May, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{53} ibid., p. 7.
Modernising Culture: provincialism, modernity and the national narrative

These debates about Gallery collections were taking place when renewed discussion about provincialism had been circulating in the Australian art world for several years. In 1974, art historian and critic Terry Smith had written in the journal *Artforum* on 'The Provincialism Problem'. Instead of the earlier debates which acknowledged Australia's isolation and history as the reason for its 'derivative culture', Smith declared that provincialism was:

not simply the product of a colonialist history, nor...merely a function of geographic location. Most New York artists, critics, collectors, dealers, and gallery goers are provincialist in their work, attitudes, and positions within the system...The projection of the New York art world as the metropolitan centre for art by every other art world is symptomatic of the provincialism of each of them.\(^5^5\)

For Smith, cultural attempts to surmount what he called 'the accelerated avant-gardism of the metropolitan centre'\(^5^6\) only resulted in continually repeating the provincial condition. As Edward Colless recently reflected on Smith's essay:

Australian culture was particularly prone to this "vicious circle", merely and repeatedly reproducing the signs of European or American modernism without the underlying substance or originating essence. ...The result, said Smith, was a succession of shipwrecked, unassimilated arrivals of cargo sadly patched together as 'Australian' culture, but amounting to a history of 'irresolutions' which did not produce strong, independent diversity but instead weak

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\(^{56}\) ibid., p. 133.
hybrids...Australian modernism, one might conclude, was something like a fan in search of a celebrity. It had been the mirror of its own subservient cringe.57

Terry Smith’s interpretation produced its own truth. New York held on as the world’s art centre, and art was a series of avant-garde moments, particularly in the version created in Mollison’s collection. Smith’s stance simply replaced an earlier expression of provincialism, only this time it suggested the impossibility of escape from it through purely cultural and not political efforts. In the 1920s and 1930s it had been construed as a tension between on the one hand, conservative forces lining up with Empire and tradition, with Australia as the follower of standards set in Britain and Europe, and on the other, with modernist artists who were seeking to place Australia at the centre of an avant-garde practice, generated from within and developing a uniquely Australian cultural identity.58 These tensions had already appeared in the activities of those who were involved in developing the concept of the National Gallery.

So, how to represent the nation and its culture? This was a question that had concerned the arts in Australia since at least the 1880s. The so-called Heidelberg School of Australian Impressionists had constructed an image of Australia that was based on the bush, the pioneer and the landscape that he (and I use the masculine deliberately) inhabited. After the First World War, Australia’s new political autonomy produced a search for new ways to depict the nation.

At a seminar on the architecture of Galleries and Museums of Art held in ANU’s University House in September 1962,59 Professor Joseph Burke, an Englishman who had come to Australia in 1946 to become Professor of Fine

59 The seminar was arranged by the Council of the ACT Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in collaboration with the Australian National University, and included both architects and museum professionals.
Arts at the University of Melbourne, and a specialist in eighteenth century English art, declared that:

The Art Gallery...is the power house of the nation's imagination. Imagination is needed to build a great nation but a nation can only be truly great by adding to a universal inheritance. The spirit directs the will and the will drives the body. In this chain by which ideas are translated into achievements, imagination plays a vital part; the arts nourish the imaginative faculty.60

His reference to a 'universal inheritance' perhaps hints at the role to which a nation-state might aspire – not just national ideas, imagination and thereby achievements, but an international stage on which the nation's imagination might be played out. This was a potent sign-post for Australia. The idea of an Australian nation was beginning to require not only a sense of national character and achievement, but also the ability to be compared favourably and equally with other nations. In other words, no longer a colonial satellite of the centre, but an equal player. This was an idea not unlike Mollison's ambitions for the National Gallery, except that he continued to declare Australia an 'outpost of Western culture', replacing London and Paris with New York as the new centre to be emulated. Politically, at this time, Australia was also starting to resituate its relationship with Britain and was looking increasingly to the United States as one of its major allies. The US was also becoming a source of social and cultural inspiration.61

This 1962 seminar was one of the earliest occasions on which the museum field came together to discuss its character and future, even though at the behest of architects. It was a time when state galleries were starting to plan building

renovations and renewals, professional standards were beginning to be rethought and improved, and the field was beginning to see that its interests and issues were shared nation-wide. Thoughts of the relationship between Australian galleries and the anticipation of a future national gallery were high on the agenda. Menzies' Federalism also appeared to be encouraging thinking about national over state interests. In one of the 1962 seminar's working sessions, Hal Missingham, then Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and also an artist, was reported to have said that:

the time has come when gallery directors should move away from the similarity of their collections and, by mutual agreement, decide to specialise in particular aspects of art which will distinguish them one from another as is the case with many of the great galleries of Europe.

Yet this enjoinder was apparently countered in discussion by the observation that 'because of the distance between the major galleries in capital cities there is a greater need in Australia for each to hold a wider range of exhibits than might

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62 See Evans, Harry, Clerk of the Senate, *Samuel Griffith Society Conference*, Canberra, 7 – 9 March 1997, ‘Federalism: an idea whose time has come? Federalism is at its most basic a geographical division of power, to ensure that a majority is geographically distributed, that it is not formed from the representatives of only a minority of states... Political parties have helped to disguise the working of the federal system, but parties as such are not incompatible with that system. The founders were not so naive as to imagine that the electors of the states would not vote for parties. The problem is the rigidity of the party system and the factionalisation of parties. The founders did not envisage a situation whereby the leaders of the group which controls 51 per cent of the faction which controls 51 per cent of the parliamentary party which receives 40-odd per cent of the electorate's votes have absolute power to control the country. The significant point is that this party system not only weakens the federal structure but tends to break down parliamentary and representative government as such. Its effect on the House of Representatives and on so-called responsible government has been more devastating that its effect on federalism and the Senate. It has resulted in prime ministers who behave like emperors, even bullying speakers of the House of Representatives in public in sittings of the House, without people being aware that representative and parliamentary government as such has been repudiated.' See also Sharman, Campbell, 2001, ‘Federalism and the Liberal Party’ in Nethercote, J.R. (ed.) *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, Sydney, The Federation Press; and Menzies, Robert, 1967, *Central Power in the Australian Commonwealth: An examination of the growth of Commonwealth Power in the Australian Federation*, University of Virginia Lectures, London.
be the case in European collections\textsuperscript{64}. This was obviously true in the days of arduous transport and communications, especially when Australia's museums and galleries had developed independently in the separate colonies. Yet while some rivalries were not going to be dismissed too readily, there was evidently a new inclination to think on a more national level.

Another speaker, Eric Westbrook, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria from 1956 to 1973, made a statement about Australia's gallery needs. He said:

Canberra needs a National Gallery, \textit{if only to satisfy tourist requirements} [my emphasis] and to round off the provision of essential facilities in the Capital City.

Having made the case, he went on to outline the problem...

The problem is what the building should house. The art market has turned into a rat race where paintings and other works are being bought as investments. It would be quite hopeless for the Federal Government to attempt to assemble a collection of old masters.

This may have been quite true, though as Director of the country's only gallery that could truly claim to have a good collection of old masters at the time (as a result of the Felton Bequest) there may also, along with a recommendation to concentrate resources, have been some self-interest here. He continued:

This would apply also to old masters of early phases of Australian art. The key works have all been acquired. Thus materials for the National Gallery in Canberra will have to be contemporary and it may require a good deal of diplomacy to persuade the authorities that they should buy modern and frequently untested work.\textsuperscript{65}

Had the story of Australian art already been told? Apparently so, and clearly

\textsuperscript{63} Ruddock, Grenfell, 1963, 'Galleries and museum of art', reporting on a seminar on Galleries and Museums of Art held in Canberra, September 1962, \textit{Architecture in Australia}, March, Vol. 52, No. 1, p. 100.

\textsuperscript{64} ibid.

\textsuperscript{65} ibid., p. 101.
some state galleries did not see themselves in the business of contemporary art, though most of their nineteenth century collections had been acquired as just that.

These debates reflected ongoing disputes between the states about their powers and rights compared to the Commonwealth. In the process, Menzies became a champion of Canberra and of Federalism, promoting the power of the nation as a unity and developing its national symbols to invest that power in the national capital.\textsuperscript{66} The long-awaited development of the National Gallery was part of this need for national symbols, thus when the National Gallery Committee of Inquiry was established in 1965 its task was no less than the potent imagining of the nation.

In the 1966 draft report of the Committee of Inquiry, circulated to Committee members for comment, were some observations that were diplomatically left out of the final report. They are worth noting for the underlying beliefs they reveal.\textsuperscript{67} For example, ‘one must be frank and say that to include even the best art from some of the periods of Australia’s art history is to display inferior work…outside influences have always played a big part in moulding our artists and a study of style derivations is a necessary part of the story.’ The Report continued: ‘It would be imperative…to acquire selected examples of European and other art to complete its history lesson. We think it was the superiority of such outside art which gave it influence over Australian artists so that some exciting purchases may thus be justified.’\textsuperscript{68} A belief that Australia occupied a peripheral place in relation to ‘great cultures’ was clearly still felt very deeply. It was only five years later that James Mollison began to develop the collection in earnest.


\textsuperscript{67} It is interesting to note that the draft report included a recommendation for a crèche, though it is not clear whether this was intended for visitors, or staff, or both. It is more likely that it was suggested for the use of visitors. This was certainly unusual for the time. It did not appear in the final report.
The draft report also referred to:

A keen feeling of loneliness, geographical and cultural, [that] afflicts the Australian people and one reaction to this feeling is a heightened sense of neighbourliness, and of fraternity with a rather discrete group of civilisations. The Committee shares this enthusiasm and it does not think a chauvinistic attitude to art would be worthy of a National Gallery.69

An international role for the Gallery was clearly seen as important, though this 'neighbourliness' was more geographical than cultural at the time. Yet the acknowledgement of Australia’s geographical location was indicative of the changing allegiances that were beginning to reconfigure Australian politics, particularly a new era of links to the USA, and, gradually, of links to Asia and the Pacific.

Nevertheless the tensions between this new outward sight and 'chauvinistic' attitudes were deeply embedded. Notably, Robert Menzies had, as Attorney-General, been instrumental in setting up the Australian Academy of Art in 1937, which lasted until 1946 and was vigorously opposed by the Contemporary Art Society, amongst others. The Academy purported to be a national institution to further art appreciation and education, but was essentially opposed to avant-garde (or modernist) art. Leading Australian art historian and a major figure in this debate, Bernard Smith, cited Menzies' words from a 1937 exhibition opening — 'Every great country has its academy. They have set certain standards of art and have served a great purpose in raising the standards of public taste by directing attention to good work...Great art speaks a language which every intelligent person can understand. The people who call themselves modernists

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69 1966, Draft report of the National Gallery Committee of Inquiry, op. cit., p. 8.
today talk a different language.'\textsuperscript{70} Menzies' remarks provoked a vigorous debate in which he was accused of intending 'the Academy to be a disciplinary measure aimed at those whose conception of art was not his'.\textsuperscript{71} Divisions were formed between establishment figures and those like George Bell, John Reed, Rupert Bunny and Adrian Lawlor, with more modernist interests, who soon formed the Contemporary Art Society to affirm their differences with the Academy and stimulate interest in contemporary art. These tensions between moderms and conservatives continued to play themselves out under Menzies' post-war government. Nevertheless there were aspects of cultural and political modernity which Menzies himself represented – particularly in the expression of the modern nation state. While, for Menzies, Australia's ties with Britain were still binding, he was well aware of the need for Australia to attain all the attributes of an independent nation. This included the development of a strong national capital and its concomitant institutions – a national gallery among them.\textsuperscript{72}

Many cultural associations also expressed conservative attitudes. For instance, the Royal Art Societies of the different Australian colonies functioned to support largely conservative artists from the late nineteenth century through the 1950s and 1960s, though there were breakaway groups who sought more congenial environments for the pursuit of modernist art. These societies attended to the social as well as the practical continuities of art.\textsuperscript{73} Other groups, like the Society of Women Painters in Sydney, also pursued the continuities of their cultural traditions, but their practices were never unproblematic. Their work may have been conservative, but they, like the moderms, were rejected by the conservative societies.\textsuperscript{74} They persevered, exhibiting what had been the art of

\textsuperscript{71} ibid., p. 217.
\textsuperscript{72} See Menzies, Robert, 1967, \textit{Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events}, Ringwood, Penguin.
the drawing room, or ladies' accomplishments, in the public realm.75 Women moving into the public sphere of the arts, however quietly, was a thoroughly modern action. So, for the development of a new cultural institution such as the National Gallery, the apparent radical shift to the modernity of Mollison occurred in a climate which was often Janus-faced. Aside from its modernist collections, and modern attitude to telling an art historical story of inexorable progress, the Gallery itself represented an expression of social, cultural and political modernity – one that was wholly supported by Menzies’ vision of a proudly independent nation, allegiances notwithstanding.

The construction of Canberra, both physically and metaphorically, was integral to the nature of the National Gallery it created. City development had been eclipsed from around 1929 and the Gallery forgotten. But in 1955 consideration of the Capital Plan was officially resumed. In that year a Senate Select Committee was established to report on the development of Canberra which included recommendations that steps be taken to establish a National Art Gallery and a National Museum and to select appropriate sites for them. The Holford Report, ‘Observations on the Future of Canberra’, was commissioned by Robert Menzies in 1957. In this report the British town planner, Sir William (later Lord) Holford, recommended a statutory body be established to monitor the city’s development and as a result, the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) was established that same year. Its tasks included ‘...to give Canberra an atmosphere and identity worthy of a national capital through the provision of monumental buildings and suitable special features’76.

In 1965 the NCDC published ‘The Future Canberra’, which forecast a National Centre on Capital Hill, where Parliament House now stands – consisting

75 ibid.
perhaps of a group of galleries displaying the nation's cultural achievements. Certainly a future gallery was always given a central location, either within or in the vicinity of the 'parliamentary triangle'.

The National Gallery architect, Col Madigan, in a talk given to the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 1980, reflected on the attitudes to a National Centre. He recalled Roger Johnson, Director of Architecture at the NCDC, saying that the National Centre reflected the 'vital national posture at the time'. He also cited Professor Trendall, a member of the NCDC, saying it was a recognisable expression of the Australian character and that Australia's historical progress would be 'focused, formally recorded and displayed for posterity'... and the Centre could 'accumulate and concentrate all the evidence of Australian culture so that all its facets were encompassed in one grand, related series of buildings and landscape...and would become a focus of national sentiment...The first building of this Centre was to be the National Gallery.' Madigan in fact regretted, as he noted in this talk, the later planning departures from this conception of a national centre.

Though the National Centre never eventuated, it clearly expressed the government's vision of a unified nation and a unified culture. Through such a centre the tensions between tradition and modernity, provincialism and internationalism, could be successfully subordinated to a larger idea — a single unproblematic modern identity. This creation of a uniquely Australian identity incorporated a form of Indigenous culture but could, through a celebratory vision, repress its violent erasure at the same time (see chapter four).
Conclusion

Modernity represented, amongst other things, rationality, tumultuous change, capitalism, seeking the new, the idea of progress, and the use of technological advancements to solve social problems. As modernity established itself, specialist disciplines developed, such as the emergence of art history as a 'science' (in Germany) as distinct from connoisseurship, which concerned authentication and judgements of taste. In Australia, apart from the early efforts of William Moore and then Bernard Smith, the discipline did not really establish itself until art history courses were begun in Melbourne in 1946. Art history created a story of progress based on formal analyses of stylistic change and the regular creation of new forms.

Since the emergence of curatorial connoisseurship in the period 1880 – 1900 in Germany, art history had created taxonomies for installations and exhibitions. Art museums/galleries were arranged as large-scale representations of art history, demonstrating the evolution of artistic expression with a stress on aesthetics as evidence of historical change and an emphasis on individual artist biographies. In fact, these emphases transcended historical explanation. Even with the newer forms of art history, incorporating social and historical analyses, these early curatorial practices have remained largely intact.

Thus I suggest that not just art history but also museology becomes a meta-narrative in the modern art museum (including the National Gallery), as if its 'truths' were givens, not choices. Museology becomes the subject of the museum as much as art history, hence the continued resorts to 'curatorial expertise' as

79 Professor Joseph Burke, an Englishman and specialist in eighteenth century art, was appointed as the first Herald Chair of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne. This was the first Chair of Art History in Australia, and the first department of art history in an Australian university. The Chair was established by newspaper publisher Sir Keith Murdoch.
something that must be privileged and the continuance of divisions of labour of
the art museum whereby, for instance, education is still often separated from
conservation or registration (Lyotard's grand narratives). Such grand narratives
inscribe the conditions for historical truth, but remain invisible so that 'truth'
appears naturalised, so museology itself becomes a discourse that provides the
conditions for truth in the museum.

As an agent in the public sphere, the emerging National Gallery took on the role
of cultural authority in a climate of celebration of national achievement and
pride. Its place was as a model of cultural standards, rather than as a site for
debate about those standards. In these early years debate about the Gallery, its
contents and function, took place outside the institution itself, particularly in the
popular media. Disputes about the Gallery were largely concerned with the price
of art, and the value of modern art in particular, however the Gallery's role as a
place to celebrate the highest artistic achievements was not in question. The
public success of the National Gallery, receiving early high visitation and setting
new standards, impacted on other arts institutions in Australia. Throughout the
1980s, many smaller museum projects and museum extensions around Australia
came to fruition through the activities of local councils and state governments,
now recognising how museums and galleries functioned as cultural icons,
promoting civic pride. As noted earlier this was also a boom time for
employment in the arts at community level, reflecting a change in the economy
also: the shift from manufacturing to services. Even in relatively small localities,
these museums and galleries could be interpreted as expressions of the
nationalist cultural policies that had helped produce the National Gallery,
incorporated into the ensembles of cultural attitudes that defined national

80 Joachimides, Alexis, 2000, 'The Museum's Discourse on Art: the formation of curatorial art
history in turn-of-the-century Berlin' in Museums and Memory, Susan Crane (ed.), Stanford
81 See Lyotard, Jean-François, 1979, The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge,
translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester, Manchester University
Press, 1984. In this book Lyotard discussed the status of knowledge, including the production, in
modernity, of the authority of narrative knowledge, which includes prescriptive statements,
reinforcing structured systems of meaning.
character. The emergence of these localised community cultural institutions integrated with the mission of the National Gallery to provide occasions for discussion about the role of cultural institutions within an Australian environment celebrating its history through its colonial past. Gradually museological philoshies began to change and the certainties of the National Gallery were challenged.

The National Museum of Australia opened in March 2001. I will argue that the NMA embraces, however successfully, a more plural perspective of Australian identity, and incorporates multidisciplinary methods in its museum practice. Many of the controversial cultural and social topics that dominated public debate, both scholarly and popular, throughout the 1980s and 1990s — gender, environment and Indigenous issues in particular — are evident in the policies guiding the mission and management of the NMA. In brief, one could characterise the difference between the National Gallery's initial depiction of a modern Australian identity and that of the NMA as being the difference, on one hand, between an identity constituted from or originating in a colonial history and, on the other, an identity diffracted through a postcolonial deconstruction of that so-called historical origin. The production of this shift in the twenty years between the opening of the two institutions is the subject of subsequent chapters of my thesis.
Part One: Sites for Cultural Communication

A fork in the road

She'll be right, mate.
Translation of one of the Braille texts on the exterior of the National Museum of Australia.

The National Museum of Australia (NMA), an idea delayed for decades, and a project stalled for twenty more years after its establishment by an Act of Parliament in 1980, seems to have been the nation’s problem child. Since as early as 2000, even before its March 2001 opening, it has been enmeshed in controversy – over its content, its approach, its technological apparatus, its building and its independence – a focus in a wider battle for ‘acceptable’ interpretations of the nation’s history and character.

Currently, in 2005, the NMA is at the centre of these debates, more so than any other museum in the country. The past years, since opening, have witnessed an accelerating rate of interest in and argument about the National Museum. Its national status and recent arrival on the scene is certainly one reason for this focus, but what other factors have produced the fire around this institution?
There is a litany of debates and grievances that have circulated around the nature of the NMA, and which this chapter will investigate. It has evidently become a powerful site for national cultural disputation. The history of the NMA, as I will show, reveals the anomalous position of culture under economic rationalism, the relative autonomy of museums and their relationships to government, and powerful shifts in thinking which have exposed deeper divisions in Australian society. Both the NMA and the NGA have been used as political footballs in games that attempt to capture the political moment in Australian life. The National Gallery, as seen in chapter one, had its critics over the costs of modern art, but rarely over its interpretation of that art. The National Museum has had to deal not only with 'money for culture', but also with disputes over its content and its means and style of interpretation.

Opening nearly twenty years after the National Gallery of Australia, the Museum signals very different attitudes to the nation and to culture, regardless of the two institutions' different disciplines. The opening of the National Gallery, I have argued, was a consummate moment in cultural modernity in Australia, defining a national identity grounded in our colonial origins. The opening of the National Museum of Australia represented a major shift in interpretations of our historical origins and presents an apparently post-modern, post-colonial deconstruction of those earlier stories. To chart this shift the institution has had to negotiate new pathways, with varying success.

Certainly the boundaries of the contemporary nation are eroding with the impact of globalisation - in transnational markets, migration, communications and the exchange of ideas. One response to this has been to reassert local/regional identities and interests, and in Australia it has sometimes led to reassertions of national identity. The museum is an important participant in this expression of identity. The museum's role may well be to imagine the nation, not just what it has been in the past, but what it might become. In this sense the NMA might be said to be imagining a network of communities, linked, not so much by their similarities, but by their ability or willingness to come together in informed
debate, to explore their attitudes and differences, and to reach some understanding of each other, rather than seeking Habermas's negotiated consensus.

Origins

In chapter one we saw the appearance of the National Gallery of Australia in the context of the development of a national culture; however the issues around the development of the NMA had very different origins. Both suffered the effects of Australian equivocation about its cultural heritage, but with very different consequences. Like the NGA, this examination or genealogy of the NMA will look at its public statements and activities, its policies and planning documents, and public responses to these. These are the ways in which the Museum has represented itself in the public sphere.

Australia had a long period in the first decades of the twentieth century in which attitudes to museums and galleries were, at best, disinterested. Walter Burley Griffin included a national museum in his plans for Canberra in 1913 and a museum in the form of a National Palace had been a dream of Sir Henry Parkes since the late nineteenth century. However a 1933 report on museums, commissioned by the British Museums Association, of which Australian institutions were members, noted that

to the average Englishman, American or Australian, art is "bunk" and culture a synonym for intellectual swank. Nor is his or her conception of either word

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1 In 1887 Sir Henry Parkes proposed a National Place to be built in Centennial Park in Sydney as a monument to the Centenary in 1888. It was to be 'a building "for the education of the soul of citizenship", to consist of a repository for historical manuscripts, a gallery for statuary and works of art, and a mausoleum to be "the resting place of eminent persons, who shall have been ordered a public funeral by both Houses of Parliament".' Martin, A.W., 1980, Henry Parkes: a biography, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, p. 370. Cited in Parliament of Australia Bills Digest No. 85, 2000 – 01, National Museum of Australia Amendment Bill 2000, www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2000-01/01bd085.htm [Accessed: 12.11.03].
materially disturbed by a visit to an art gallery or a museum. ...[so it is hardly surprising that] ... they regard a museum or an art gallery as a luxury only to be supported in exceptionally good times, instead of looking upon them as one of the greatest cultural factors in any state and therefore to be well supported at all times.²

This report, produced by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, revealed the parlous state of museums and galleries in Australia. While it was many years before its findings were acted upon, it made Australian attitudes to its cultural heritage abundantly clear — rather than a recent phenomenon, economics have long overridden cultural priorities.

Decades after this was written, and as art galleries began to move forward, it still appeared to hold considerable sway in thinking about other museums, particularly by Federal governments. While the Australian states, which had always been the primary supporters of museums, began to increase their subsidies from the 1960s onwards, especially in the context of a gradual revitalisation of Australian state art museums, the Commonwealth was lamentably unwilling to make a commitment to a national museum. In the 1960s and 1970s, visual arts received proportionally greater government funding.³ Art museums were reaching an ascendancy in Australian cultural life that was largely unprecedented. Art and art galleries were increasingly seen as more popular and glamorous, whilst museums retained their largely stodgy and mundane image.

By 1975 the National Gallery was well on the way to its opening (the building had a design and collecting had commenced in earnest), so a broad-ranging and

substantial report, commissioned by the Labor Government under Whitlam, paid particular attention to the need for the museum and links to a proposed Gallery of Aboriginal Australia. Known as the Pigott Report (after its Chairman, businessman Peter Pigott) it was a very forward thinking and comprehensive analysis of the contemporary state of Australian museums and art galleries, and of the Commonwealth's role in relation to state, local government, and institutional authorities. The Committee of Inquiry that produced the Pigott Report recommended a number of significant initiatives. These included the creation of an Australian Museums Commission (which never eventuated), and that funds should be made available by government for encouraging greater educational use of museums, for special or 'emergency' acquisitions, and for conservation and conservation training (resulting in the course in Cultural Heritage Management and Conservation only recently discontinued by the University of Canberra). It is noteworthy that, given the current emphases of most museums around the world, the report recommended that funds not be given to museums which are so strongly directed towards tourism and entertainment that their standards of historical accuracy are violated. This was somewhat ironic given the recent accusations made against the NMA, as will be seen in chapter six. The Pigott Report also proposed the establishment of a register of objects of national significance; export protection for rare cultural

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4 The Pigott Report's formal title was Museums in Australia 1975: Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections including the Report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia. Around the same time, a parallel inquiry by the Hope Committee produced a Report on the National Estate, 1974, primarily considering immovable heritage – historic sites and buildings. Its recommendations were also reflected in the Pigott Report.

5 The Committee included: Peter Pigott (Chairman, and an executive with a Swiss Medical Corporation); G.Blainey (Geoffrey Blainey – historian); R.W.Boswell, (Bill Boswell, a physicist, who died shortly before the report was presented); Mrs. A Clayton (Wendy Clayton, a photographer and the committee's community representative); D.J.Mulvaney (Professor of Prehistory, ANU); F.H. Talbot (zoologist and Director of the Australian Museum in Sydney); D.F.Waterhouse (Dr. Douglas Waterhouse, Entomologist and Chief of CSIRO's Division of Entomology); F.J.W'aters (Secretary of the Postal Union and union representative on the committee); and E.E.Payne (Executive Member, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Health, which had statutory authority for the Mackenzie collection which was the basis for the Australian Institute of Anatomy – Payne drafted the report). According to Gough Whitlam Bill Boswell 'in the late 1960s, had urged me to establish a Smithsonian Institution in Canberra' Whitlam, Gough, 1985, The Whitlam Government 1972 – 1975, Ringwood, Viking, p. 574.

6 1975, Pigott Report, Section 2.7, p. 3.
material, and the legislation to protect historic sites on land and sea. These have all been gradually introduced over the intervening years - export protection legislation was established in 1986 with the Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act; the Commonwealth Shipwrecks Act and Commonwealth Heritage Act were introduced in 1976 and 1993 respectively; various state legislation has enabled protection of a range of Aboriginal sites and relics; the states have established a range of heritage registers; and the Commonwealth Heritage Collections Council seeks to identify heritage objects in the distributed national collection,\(^7\) though its knowledge is largely confined to Commonwealth, state and local government collecting institutions and universities. Similarly, the Pigott Report recommended a scheme for tax incentives for donations to institutions (now enshrined in legislation and known as the Cultural Gifts Program).

However its primary recommendation was that a Museum of Australia be established in Canberra and included the advice that the 'new national museum should not attempt to imitate or duplicate those fields in which the older Australian museums are strong, but should concentrate on three main themes or galleries: Aboriginal man [sic] in Australia; European man [sic] in Australia; and the Australian environment and its interaction with the two-named themes.'\(^8\)

The Pigott Report is worth considering in some detail, as its comments and recommendations for a national museum were at the forefront of museological thinking and the subsequent development of the project has remained largely true to the spirit and sometimes the letter of this 1975 work.

The committee noted that

\[\text{in the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century,}\]

\[\text{a symbolic gulf had existed between art collections and}\]

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\(^7\) See 1993, Heritage Collections in Australia: a plan for a new partnership. Cultural Ministers' Council, Heritage Collections Working Group, April, p. 10, which refers to 'this dispersed array of heritage objects across the Nation as the Distributed National Collection: the sum of all heritage collections held in Commonwealth, State and Territory institutions, regional and local museums, libraries and galleries, other organisations and agencies and in numerous private collections throughout Australia.'

\(^8\) 1975, Pigott Report, Recommendations, p.3.
scientific collections, and the public was often lost in that gulf...the natural science museums tended to be impersonal: the category and the classification of the objects were all-important.

The taxonomies of scientific collections were aimed at an ordering of knowledge for purposes of specialist study, and were not aimed at the education of the general public, but as the committee observed there was a transformation when Aboriginal art moved into the realm of the art gallery.

Curiously, Aboriginal art had long been displayed impersonally in natural science museums in Australia, but only when Aboriginal art was 'discovered' by art galleries did the artists become known as people rather than as nameless ciphers...

Despite their differences though, the Pigott Committee was well aware that both art and science museums faced the same problems, including the habit of being presented as secular temples, commenting that

Science late in the nineteenth century was reverenced by many as the new religion and so science museums were housed in monumental buildings. Today, in influential quarters, art is the new religion and so an art museum is more likely to be housed in a new parthenon. Nonetheless, the art museums have nearly all of the troubles and the unanswered challenges facing other kinds of museums.9

The reference to the role of galleries in the individualising of Aboriginal art is notable, as is the separate planning committee, convened by the Special Minister of State, Lionel Bowen, and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, James Cavanagh, at the same time as the Pigott Report, that was created to report on establishing a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia10. This will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

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10 The term ‘Gallery’ was chosen deliberately because it reflected an original proposal by Professor Stanner for a Gallery of Southern Man. The Report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia noted that ‘in part the general opinion which has formed since
The Pigott Report, recognising the earlier problems of museums of natural history, explored the nature of a National Museum of History. Recommending its establishment in Canberra, it declared the argument for an Australian national museum to be particularly powerful, though affirming it as *more* than national:

It should be stressed that a continent, rather than a nation, is the ideal focus for a museum, because the natural boundaries are more permanent and powerful than man-made boundaries. Hitherto, because of national boundaries, no continent has constituted the central theme of a large museum.\(^{11}\)

Even more significantly, the Report professed a major new role for the national museum, one which acknowledged the schisms and elisions in the Australian historical record, obscuring Indigenous experience and viewing European experience as one of heroic triumph over land rather than a series of accommodations to it. It concluded that

a new national museum offers a chance to mend several intellectual rifts which still affect those major museums which were created in Australia in the nineteenth century...[these] tended to divorce Aboriginal man from European man and to divorce European man from Nature. The achievements of Aboriginal society over 40,000 years were minimised; and the subtle inter-dependence of European man and Nature was also minimised. Accordingly, many of the factors which moulded the human history of both black and white settlers were neglected.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{11}\) 1975, Pigott Report, Recommendations, p.70.

\(^{12}\) ibid.
The Pigott Report recommended that the museum should link man and the Australian environment; the three themes or sections should be “each linked intellectually and physically to the other”

13. The sections were to be housed in a building of 100,000 square metres with at least 60,000 for display, divided equally between the themes. (Notably, the finally constructed building, opened in 2001, has only 6,600 square metres of display space, so the original vision was vast.) The building was expressly not to have a ‘cathedral-type atmosphere’ instead enabling the easy facilitation of enjoyment and excitement. The themes were to be linked by a nature park in the museum grounds which would have been a unique approach at the time and would have allowed the use of live specimens (flora and fauna) with more appeal than ‘a stuffed skin in a showcase’.14 The site therefore would require a substantial area of natural landscape and with space to grow or alter with the nation. The land was to be as much a part of the Museum as the buildings and in 1977, three years before the Museum of Australia Bill was passed, eighty-eight hectares were set aside at Yarramundi Reach in Canberra to allow for this vision of the Museum.

The Pigott Committee was keen to avoid the fragmentation of knowledge into ‘familiar compartments’ advocating instead ‘the sensation of a journey through time’.15 The term ‘national’ was defined in the broadest sense, including portraying international influences, communications with the ‘outside world’, Australian Antarctica and Papua New Guinea (having being physically joined to Australia for at least three quarters of the history of this continent, and administered by Australia for a time). Additionally, whilst supporting the report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, the Pigott committee expressed reservations about it being governed as a separate statutory

13 ibid., p.71.
14 ibid., p.72.
15 ibid., p.72. The reference to a ‘journey through time’ suggests a familiar chronology, though I suspect the Committee saw this as a larger vision of deep time and more expansive references.
authority, doubting that divided management could achieve an integrated museum of national history.\textsuperscript{16}

In particular, the committee stressed an attitude which has great resonance today, given the force of current arguments over the nature of the museum. (This will be discussed in detail in chapter three.) It declared that ‘the museum, where appropriate, should display controversial issues. In our view, too many museums concentrate on certainty and dogma, thereby forsaking the function of stimulating legitimate doubt and thoughtful discussion.’\textsuperscript{17} In 2003, as will be seen in chapter six, there was great concern about a review of the museum being undertaken, by largely conservative forces, as a result of recent hotly contested debates. By contrast, in 1975, the committee recommended periodic scrutiny of displays by specialists in small seminars, or by consultants. This was to ensure ‘accuracy’ and ‘intellectual adequacy’. The motivation, unlike 2003, was to keep the museum up-to-date rather than becoming a ‘second-hand encyclopaedia’.

At the time, it was commented that ‘a museum’s ineffectiveness is often misted over by its monopoly position. Each Australian or European museum tends to have a monopoly in its own region...[which] protects museums from visible failure.’\textsuperscript{18} Today the national capital contains a vast array of publicly run collecting and exhibiting institutions.\textsuperscript{19} The NMA exists in a local, as well as a national, environment that is replete with institutions and exhibitions competing for attention and for the national imagination. There is a great deal of knowledge that the public is now being asked to negotiate and assess as it uses these sites and that is even being filtered through various media to non-users. So, instead of

\textsuperscript{16} ibid., p. 81.
\textsuperscript{17} ibid., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{19} These include, as well as the National Museum of Australia, Commonwealth institutions such as the National Gallery of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, the National Portrait Gallery, National Archives, National Library, Screensound, Questacon, the Parliament House Art Collection and numerous ACT Government-run museums and galleries.
having a monopoly on knowledge, the NMA now exists in a field that is continually contested.

The 1980 National Museum Act defined Australian history to include 'the natural history of Australia and ...the history of the interaction of man with the Australian natural environment'. It confirmed that a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia would be part of the Museum. The three themes identified by the Pigott Report were not enshrined in the legislation. Rather, it made general references to a national historical collection that would be developed and maintained, and essentially that the museum would exhibit, research and disseminate information relating to Australian history 'in the national interest'.

An Interim Council was established which reported in 1982. At the time, it looked to the coming Bicentenary of Australia in 1988 as a peak of interest in Australia's history, but believed 1990 was the most appropriate opening date, allowing more time for development. The Interim Council included Peter Pigott and John Mulvaney (Professor of Prehistory and Anthropology at the Australian National University), along with Dr Eric Willmot, then Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and Dr Don McMichael, at the time Secretary, Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs and Environment, and who was to become the Museum's first Director. Not surprisingly, the recommendations of the Pigott Report were closely reflected in the new

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21 Professor John Mulvaney was a major influence on the Pigott Committee, having been very well versed in international and national museological developments, and in his knowledge and support of Indigenous affairs. For discussions of his influence see Bonyhady, T. and Griffiths, T. (eds.), 1996, Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press. A brief biography may be found at www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au/awards/john_mulvaney.php [Accessed: 6.12.2005] which details, for example, his involvement as a Commissioner of the Australian Heritage Commission and in developing criteria for World Heritage listings with UNESCO.
22 Dr Don McMichael has been on the executive of ICOM Australia, is an active member of Museums Australia, and was Director of the NMA from 1984 to 1989 (See Appendix B). He was Chair of the review committee which produced the critical 1996 report Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia. Eric Willmot, an Indigenous man, is also an author, engineer, educator and administrator, and has also been Director-General of Education in South Australia and the ACT, and Head of Arts and Cultural Heritage in South Australia.
Council's report. That is, the three themes, or interwoven strands were essentially retained, with one expansion. They were described as the history of Aboriginal people; the history of Australia since 1788; the history of the Australian environment; and the interaction between people and the environment.

Advanced presentation techniques were recommended (as well as traditional displays). Live performances and activities were to be part of the mix, going beyond conventional static display. The museum's emphasis was to be more associated with everyday life — work and leisure, linking indoor and outdoor activities (a continued preference for a site with a large natural landscape) and to be as interested in the twentieth century as with colonial origins. Although the Yarramundi Reach site had been set aside, disputes over sites continued until 1996.

The museum Charter announced that 'the Museum will reflect the development of the Australian nation in all its cultural diversity. In particular it will create, through the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, a focus for the cultural aspirations of the Aboriginal people...[It] will emphasise that the histories of the Australian environment, of Aboriginal people and of non-Aboriginal people, and the interaction between people and the environment are closely related..."23

The aim was for a 'comprehensive and integrated account of Australian history in a framework of enjoyment...underpinned by fine scholarship; a Museum

23 1982, Report of the Interim Council: Plan for the Development of the Museum of Australia, Museum of Australia, Canberra, p. 5. The Interim Council (see Appendix A) was also charged with initiating steps to appoint a Director.
which avoids approaching issues from a single viewpoint and is always critical about the accuracy, importance and relevance of the information that it gives to all visitors..."  

24 Included in the aims for the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, was to study and communicate about '200 years of Aboriginal contact with non-Aboriginal society since 1788, emphasising the grim consequences for Aboriginal culture but also the survival and recent revival of that culture'.  

25 The Gallery of Aboriginal Australia was to 'in no way be tainted by “us” and “them” distinctions which in some other countries have alienated Indigenous peoples from museums'. In addition, the report said that 'the Museum will emphasise stark realities in addition to the romance of the past. Poverty and depressions, strikes, loneliness, racism, natural disasters, disease and flies; all must feature along with the explorers, bushrangers, aviators, sporting figures and other popular heroes.'  

26 It was to promote new knowledge of Australian history, to be an innovator and a leader in communication. Emphasis was also given to close community involvement, in recognition of recent museum practice, to ensure all people could be able to fully participate in museum activities.  

The long wait

This reaffirmation of the principles to govern the new museum did not produce much further commitment from government. For many years the museum appeared like an apparition on various political agendas, never materialising. The recommendations of the Pigott Report were accepted by Government but, though established by an Act of Parliament in 1980, the project was dogged by delays.

24 ibid., p. 38.
25 ibid., p. 39.
26 ibid., p. 55.
27 ibid., p. 40.
28 ibid., Point 36, p. 40; and also Point 61, p. 56.
A minimal staff and operating budget kept the project barely more than ticking over. After the 1983 federal election, a temporary building was erected at Yarramundi Reach in which the Museum staff mounted small displays. A modest touring exhibition program was developed that enabled a minor presence for the museum across Australia. There was little or no money for collection purchases, although donations were an important source of acquisitions. By 1986, and operating from a collection store in the Canberra industrial suburb of Mitchell, the project was on hold whilst money was diverted to fund the new National Maritime Museum in Sydney (also a recommendation of the Pigott Report). The 1988 Federal budget deferred plans for the Museum for five years and promised to lend its collection to the various States. If this proposed course of action had actually occurred it may well have signalled an institution that would be forever without a building, condemned to be only a virtual site. (A reprieve in the 1989 budget gave the museum $1 million with a further $900,000 for the following three years.) As museologist Kylie Winkworth commented,

The fact that the decision to retreat from the museum was made in 1988, of all years, speaks volumes for our fragile sense of national esteem. In that year of national posturing the Government found the idea of a National Museum dispensable, while building for itself a palatial billion-dollar

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29 The NMA collection, known as the National Historical Collection and which consists of around 190,000 items, initially included objects transferred in 1980 by the Commonwealth Government, including objects from government departments and agencies, and from the Australian Institute of Anatomy, the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and the University of Sydney. There are 80,000 stone tools in the collection, around 1,600 bark paintings from all over Australia and from two centuries, and the well-known icon, the heart of racehorse Phar Lap. The collection acquires items that relate to the three main themes of the Museum - land, nation and people. In 2002, eight priority areas were established. These were: interacting with the environment; peopling Australia; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; governing; creating culture; celebrating life; making economies; and building Australia. The NMA collects mainly through donations, sometimes accessing sponsorships, and is sometimes able to purchase. It does not, however, like the NGA, have a dedicated acquisitions fund through its annual budget allowance from government. For a brief discussion of the NMA collection see Foster, S. G., 2004, 'Yesterday and Tomorrow at the National Museum of Australia', Borderlands e-journal, Vol. 3, No. 3, no pagination, http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol3no3_2004foster_yesterday.htm [Accessed: 21. 8. 2005]. See also Appendix D.
bunker...[this is] not a substitute for the realisation of a National Museum, since what’s important about the museum is its unique interpretation of the material.30

Another factor in the delays may have been, as Winkworth also pointed out, that the concept of the National Museum had never really been successfully conveyed to the public. It had support from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and museum interest groups, but had not arisen from a groundswell of community demand.31

Still, in 1988, when the National Museum came close to being abandoned, a Friends’ group was formed to lobby support.32 Its president Winifred Rosser, prominent spokesperson, actor Jack Thompson, and its many members, came forward in fierce support of the fledgling institution. The Friends’ activities finally began to promote the museum to the public, though a lack of political will continued to obstruct the project.33

This was the period of the ascendancy of economic rationalism in Australian politics. As the 1933 Carnegie Report had already identified, cultural ventures in

31 Peter Pigott wrote a letter to the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald in 1990 in which he said, in response to another reader’s letter, ‘Like the politicians, Harry Robinson in “Happy Birthday Australia — again” (Sydney Morning Herald, September 21) finds the concept of the National Museum of Australia project difficult to comprehend. The fault lies with past museum councils in not telling the public and politicians what the museum is about. I have been on every council until this year, so I will take the blame. It would have been easy to build a museum in the Parliamentary Triangle which could have won the approval of the unimaginative and stodgy, helping to reinforce the long-held belief that museums are dark and gloomy and uninspiring. Those of us involved with the NMA were determined that its exhibitions would stun, amuse, inform and excite the visitor. Letters, ‘Bringing Our Past to Life, Bugs Included’ in Sydney Morning Herald, 3 October 1990, p. 12, http://global.factiva.com/en/arch/display.asp [Accessed: 2.5.2003].
Australia had always to compete with apparently higher economic priorities and it still seemed that the belief in culture as a luxury had never disappeared. Community need was insufficient for the expenditure of large sums of government money. From the late 1980s the Federal Department of Finance, in a new climate of entrepreneurial government, began to argue for putting government enterprises on a business footing, incorporating the development of performance indicators, scope for economies or efficiencies, and specifically to 'reduce the call on the Commonwealth to meet the recurrent funding needs of existing and proposed museums and institutions'.

A new Ministerial Museums Review had been commissioned by the Arts Minister and the Minister for Finance and conducted between 1986 and 1988. No full report was ever finalised. However, '...material from the review was included in confidential Cabinet submissions from the two Ministers which formed the basis of a series of decisions announced in the 1988-89 Budget'. The Department of Finance declared that 'considerable budgetary restraint' informed this review far more than previous ones, and that Commonwealth assistance for museums was a matter of 'political judgement rather than technical advice'. In other words, industry concerns were lower on the agenda.

The Finance Department's discussion paper, which proved to be of major significance, revealed concern that the Pigott Report did not emphasise resource issues. In fact, Finance seemed to be deliberately back-pedalling on the outcomes of the Pigott Report, which it acknowledged had had particular support within the museum community. It stated that

the Pigott Report proposals were not explicitly endorsed by the Government of the day in the late 1970s [in fact, by this time, a Liberal Government under Malcolm

35 ibid.
36 ibid., p. 2.
Fraser], though some individual recommendations have been taken up by later governments, and the Pigott proposals have been generally treated in the museum community, and to some extent by Governments, as a loose developmental blue print over the past decade. In this way the Pigott Report can be seen as influential in increasing Commonwealth expenditure in the museum field, and in maintaining high expectations for the future.37

The Fraser Government intentionally distanced itself from what it had said were the excesses of the Whitlam Government, particularly in government spending, which had been at the centre of its summary dismissal.38 From that time economic management has been the key priority for successive governments. So it is not surprising to read the Department of Finance words, after declaring the Pigott approach 'expansionary', making the claim that 'it is perhaps symptomatic of the changed economic climate and increasing prominence of concern for efficiency and value for money that, despite its early [sic] establishment by legislation (1980), the Museum of Australia has made relatively little progress and budgetary constraints have continued to put the proposal on hold.'39 The conclusion was that national collecting institutions should be required to take more entrepreneurial approaches to their activities, and they were consequently required to set revenue targets and performance indicators by 1989-90. As previously mentioned, a direct recommendation of the Department of Finance was that the construction of the NMA was to be deferred for five years and the collection to be exhibited in existing institutions, including the State museums.

37 Department of Finance Discussion Paper, 1989, *What Price Heritage? The Museums Review and the Measurement of Museum Performance*, Department of Finance, Canberra, March, p. 3. The Report was not specifically endorsed by the government of the day because it was delivered just before the Whitlam Government, that commissioned it, was dismissed.

38 The federal Liberal Party, under the leadership of Malcolm Fraser, had, in 1975, effectively forced a federal election by refusing to pass the supply bill in the Senate.

39 Department of Finance Discussion Paper, 1989, op. cit., p. 5. Gough Whitlam has referred to the decision of the Fraser Government to ignore the Pigott Report's recommendation for an Australian Museums Commission, saying 'Like many of our initiatives it was ignored by the Fraser Government, which opted instead for the establishment of a Museum of Australia, an institution which, in any rational scale of priorities, and in the view of Pigott himself, should have followed, rather than preceded, the implementation of the report's more urgent
Government was also not to establish new Commonwealth museums 'for the foreseeable future'.

Finance also 'reminded' that Commonwealth expenditure had increased threefold in real terms since the Pigott Report in 1975. Whilst accepting that 'quality' was an important issue, Finance stressed the need for a means of assessing that quality, which in its terms, needed numbers rather than 'value judgements'. It even went so far as to declare that there was no longer unanimous agreement, in contemporary museological circles, with ICOM's definition of museums as 'non-profit making entities'.40 This, according to the discussion paper, seemed to be based largely on one document – the 1986 Hancock Report on the Museum of Victoria, a review of a single institution.41

The Public Good

In the Report 'public good' benefits were lauded as the main justification for government 'intervention' in national cultural heritage. The use of the term 'intervention', of course, already implies that an ideological and not disinterested position was being taken by the Department of Finance. Nevertheless it noted that intangible benefits included 'psychic income' such as the development of national pride and a consciousness of collective identity. It was also acknowledged that economic benefits may accrue from cultural tourism. However, a large part of the discussion paper looked at 'private good' benefits from museums, where these would accrue to specific individuals and groups who would receive entertainment, education, goods and services, corporate benefits like sponsorship, and even research which could benefit particular recommendations. It was, however, a significant acknowledgment of Federal responsibility for museums and a vindication of my Government's policies.' Whitlam, Gough, 1985 op. cit., p. 574.

40 See ICOM definition of a museum in chapter three, altered in 1974 to include 'an institution in the service of society and its development'.

interests. This was a very debatable understanding of 'private good' which was subsequently contested by the Federal Arts Department, however the Department of Finance used it to suggest that identification of these private benefits should help to evaluate the 'user-pays' principle which would lead to the 'generation of off-budget revenue to offset or supplement appropriations provided to maintain the public good benefit.' In a very deft move, and in reference to demystifying cultural heritage, the paper declared that cultural heritage, which previously has enjoyed something of a special position remote from the scrutiny of economic analysis, is now considered in many ways to be no different from other activities of government and consequently should be subject to the same rigour in assessment of benefits and costs. A particular focus of attention at the margin is the degree to which private benefits have been disguised as public benefits and hence the degree to which public moneys have unnecessarily subsidised direct beneficiaries of institutions and their programs.

The level of public investment in national cultural heritage was declared as 'necessarily a matter for political judgement' but it was clear which position Finance was taking. It noted that the United Kingdom, whose example Australia had tended to follow in the past, was itself questioning the role of government in cultural heritage and assessing the principle of 'user-pays'. At the very least the possibility of entry fees was thus raised as a potential way to recover 'private benefit' costs. In any event it was considered absolutely basic that museums should be more accountable for their financial performance.

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45 ibid., p. 28.
46 ibid., pp. 26 — 29.
Although this discussion paper had a devastating effect on the development of the National Museum, it was also taken up by the Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories (DASETT) which declared the Department of Finance's discussion paper methods of performance measurement 'meaningless' and that the price of heritage, whilst pertinent, should be considered in the context of the value of heritage. Thus DASETT's own discussion paper was titled *What Value Heritage?* Essentially it questioned the integrity of the data used by Finance and remarked that it had a different understanding of the fundamental role of Commonwealth collecting institutions, urging the need for Australia to reassess the value of its cultural heritage. As the discussion paper declared:

> For museums to enrich society’s intellectual development and cultural identities and values, they must seek to reach all components of society. Increasingly the relevance of museums will be evaluated by the extent to which they meet the needs and expectations of all segments of society...Their proper development is essential to our national identity. Until this is accepted there is a serious danger that the only consideration will be the cost factor without an understanding or recognition of benefits. Without that understanding there is no basis for practical decision making.

DASETT's analysis stressed the need for museums to reach into many communities and echelons of Australian society, and while not acknowledging the more assertive calls for social justice found in the philosophy of the new museology (and that were prefigured in the Pigott Report), the department certainly pointed to the weaknesses of the economic rationalist model.

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47 DASETT, 1990, op. cit.
48 ibid., pp. 48 – 49.
A Reprieve

Perhaps these sentiments struck a chord for, in spite of the Finance Department’s enjoiners against any further museum development, a new reprieve seemed to come, in 1990, when Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced that he wanted the NMA to open in time for the Centenary of Federation in 2001. This was also agreed to by the then Minister for the Arts Ros Kelly despite having conspicuously said in 1989 that the ‘museum had become a luxury rather than a necessity.’

Then in another reversal in 1991, then Prime Minister Paul Keating declared Australia ‘museumed-out’ and that it had too many museums, saying he ‘didn’t agree with’ the National Museum. Perhaps he saw them as elitist or uninspiring, although his comments received little further clarification.

The NMA opened a Visitors’ Centre at Yarramundi Reach in 1986, thereby obtaining a public profile, and by 1992 was using Old Parliament House as a venue for small scale exhibitions. It shared the venue with Australian Archives, the National Film and Sound Archive (Screensound) and a fledgling Portrait

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50 Millar, Janet, 1992, ‘National Museum is left simmering on a Back Burner’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Special Supplement, 20 August, p. 15, http://global.factiva.com/en/arch/display.asp [Accessed: 2.5.2003] Millar noted that ‘Early last year Mr. Keating was reported as declaring Australia was “museumed-out”’. He said he thought Australia had too many museums. “I don’t agree with the National Museum of Australia”, he said.’ Millar also noted that this statement was followed ‘only a month ago [July 1992], at the AWGIE Awards, [when] he said: “A museum housed imaginatively, if unpretentiously, a uniquely Australian museum, has a certain appeal”.’ The Opposition at the time shared similar reticence: Senator Baume, Opposition Spokesman for the Arts, was also reported by Millar as saying ‘ My inclination is that the National Museum should be much more a collection agency and outreach service, with some display (facility).’

51 The small displays at the Yarramundi Visitors Centre included, variously, a sampling of items from the collection, for instance a wool baling machine and associated stories, displays of material connected to May Gibbs’ stories (Snuggle Pot and Cuddle Pie) and *More Than Meets the Eye: reflections on the Aboriginal Art and Craft Industry*. Among exhibitions at Old Parliament House was *Bringing the House Down* (political cartoons, held in 1999 and 2000) which has now become an annual exhibition at the new NMA building.
Gallery under the auspices of the NMA—a grab bag of developments in need of government support. The following year the NMA was charged by government to develop tours of Old Parliament House to make it a ‘living museum of political history’. Hardly a prominent feature of the 1975 and 1982 concepts for the museum.

A 1993 Labor Party election promise saw the Labor Government pledge $26 million for the NMA over four years if the museum could match this amount by contributions from the private sector. Australia, however, has never had the level of private philanthropy in the arts or heritage that is seen in the United States, so the task was impossible and the museum ultimately failed to raise the money.52

After the election Keating was reported to have said ‘he could not see the value of housing the collection in “yet another massive mausoleum”’. The report continued—‘it is understood Mr. Keating and Mr. Lee [Minister for the Arts] no longer see the museum as the key plank of the Government’s cultural policy and are reluctant to spend any more than $26 million on a building, even if it means the collection remains largely unseen.’53 The year 1994 also saw moves by the Keating Government to shift the museum’s collection of Aboriginal artefacts to South Australia. They backed down only after strong opposition from the Aboriginal community and from within Caucus.54

52 Early, Gerard, 1989, Review of the Australian National Gallery: A report to the Minister for the Arts and Territories, Canberra, Office of the Minister for the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, February, p. 43.
53 Meade, Amanda, 1994, “Keating Warehouses Museum Plan” in Sydney Morning Herald, 12 October, p. 8; and, for example, in March 1994 the Prime Minister said: ‘It can always be said, and often with irresistible logic and passion, that we need one more gallery or museum. One more place to put our heritage on show. It may have reached the ears of some of you that I have sometimes resisted this logic and this passion. It is true. I have not always been persuaded that another huge and hugely expensive building on the banks of Lake Burley Griffin ranked high among the things we need for a better national life.’ [Speech by the Prime Minister, the Hon. J. P. Keating, MP, opening the National Portrait Gallery and its inaugural exhibition, 1994 About Face: Aspects of Australian Portraiture, exhibition catalogue, Old Parliament House, 30 March, p. 2; see also earlier footnote, number 18, on the NMA collection.
That same year, the Government introduced its cultural policy statement *Creative Nation* which emphasised new technologies in the cultural sector and presented the NMA as likely to have an intangible form – the idea was that it would have a greater presence on the internet and CD Rom, than as objects in a building.\(^55\) However, the Government remained committed to a building for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artefacts, now to be on Acton Peninsula – the hand held out to Aboriginal Australia, which was politically expedient, though it was effectively silent on the NMA.

Thus, in one fell swoop, Government had yet again abandoned the idea of the national museum and also introduced the Acton site in place of the landscape concept of Yarramundi Reach. The Friends of the NMA objected vigorously. ‘They hit out at what they said was the Government’s blatant and pernicious attempt to dismantle the concept of the museum by announcing that it was going to establish a separate Gallery of Aboriginal Australia,’\(^56\) thereby destroying the tripartite vision of the Museum. Meanwhile, the incumbent NMA Director, Margaret Coaldrake, made only conciliatory public statements, saying, after Keating declared it better to take heritage to the people rather than making them come to Canberra, that ‘philosophically, I agree with the Prime Minister…the traveling exhibitions, the idea of providing loans to other institutions, this outward-looking stance, acknowledges Australia and what it is today’.\(^57\) She never appeared to fight these government decisions, but rather capitulated to the political moment.\(^58\)

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\(^56\) Frith, Marion, 1995, *Age*, 9 October, p. 15; see also earlier reference to Current Issues Brief 21 by John Gardiner-Garden, footnote 53.
\(^57\) Margaret Coaldrake was quoted in Bennie, Angela, 1994, ‘Wanted: A Home for Our History’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November, p. 17.
\(^58\) Margaret Coaldrake, who did an MA in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (1986), was the third director of the Museum. She was preceded by Dr Don McMichael, who had been Deputy-Director of the Australian Museum in Sydney, and Kaye Dal Bon, a career public servant. After Coaldrake’s tenure, the post of director was held by staffers Dr Darryl McIntyre and Louise Douglas in the interim until Dr Bill Jonas (an academic, lecturer in geography at the University of Newcastle, and then Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies from 1991 to 1996), who had been unable to take up his appointment at [footnote continues overleaf](#)
Not so Des Griffin, Director of the Australian Museum in Sydney, and President of Museums Australia Inc., who responded in a letter to *The Age* saying

Social history will not be sufficiently represented at Old Parliament House, Customs House in Sydney or in other ad hoc venues and certainly not at the Australian War Memorial. The Government’s current proposals seem to disregard this and the recent upsurge in interest in history by Australian people as well as the vastly more pluralistic and non-triumphalist approach of history today (excluding political correctness). Any development which gives prominence to “official” history or political history will do no more than allow most of history to drop through the cracks in the floor. Too many ‘national’ museums do not take up the challenge available. Australia’s could!\(^{59}\)

In the vacuum of political will to actually build the museum, wrangling over the site continued. An advisory committee was established to recommend on siting and many options were brought into play. They included Old Parliament House, the adjacent Rose Garden site, the ‘mall’ in the Parliamentary Triangle between the National Gallery and the National Library, Kings’ Park, Acton Peninsula and Yarramundi. The Friends maintained their allegiance to the original concept and continued to support Yarramundi. Eventually, however, in December 1996, a land swap was announced in which the Kingston foreshore was transferred to ACT ownership in exchange for Acton Peninsula being turned over to the Commonwealth.\(^{60}\) Shortly after, Prime Minister John Howard announced that

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59 Griffin, Des, 1995, letter to the Editor, “Why should our national museum be languishing?” in *Age*, 20 March.

the Museum would be built on Acton Peninsula and that it would be completed by 2001, the Centenary of Federation. While his motivation for finally funding the construction of the NMA may have been that he was looking for a suitable cultural project to celebrate the Centenary of Federation, it is also likely that the decision was connected to the forthcoming by-election for an ACT seat (held on 1 February 1977). The following year it was announced that funding for the building would come from the $1 billion Centenary of Federation Fund.

The building project itself was controversial — the Royal Australian Institute of Architects complained about the terms of the design competition and its haste — concerns were expressed that the whole project was being foolishly rushed, and there were initial reservations about the new method of project alliancing for the construction team. Ultimately, however, the museum opened, on time, on 11 March 2001.

New visions

In order to understand the philosophy behind the NMA in 2001, and why it was very different to that of the National Gallery in 1982, it is necessary to understand the changes in Australian society and politics, and particularly

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61 ibid., p. 22.
62 There was some parrying between the political parties in late 1996, with Bob McMullen, Labor Representative for the Canberra, accusing the government of a cynical ploy in advance of the by-election, while Gary Naim, Liberal MP for Eden-Monaro, reminded that the promise to build the museum was in their last election platform. See McMullen, Bob, 1996, Hansard, House Adjournment, 13 December, p. 8627 and Naim, Gary, 1997, Hansard, Question without notice, 18 March, p. 2281.
65 Project alliancing had only been used in North Sea oil ventures by BP and engineering projects in Australia prior to the construction of the NMA. It was an arrangement to guarantee project completion on time, on budget and to pre-agreed high standards. Any cost over-runs are covered by the alliance partners, whilst they also share in any profits resulting from efficiencies. The alliance partners (for example, client, architect, construction company) also agree not to sue each other. Ultimately it proved a successful means of guaranteeing the timely and cost-effective delivery of the project.
museological thinking, that occurred in the intervening period. As will be discussed further in later chapters, the ideas about the NMA and its vision of Australia that figured in the Pigott Report, reflected changes in museum philosophies that really only began to take hold across the museum profession in Australia in the decades that followed. Following the recognition of minority or repressed interests, through feminism and gay politics for instance, in Australia at large a more pluralist and diverse society was emerging. Australians were acknowledging their cultural enrichment by generations of migrants, and began to seek new modes of representing different groups in museums and in the public sphere generally. New stories emerged, not so much, say, of political and economic reasons for migration, but individual stories of journeys to Australia and tales of creating new lives and new communities. New cultural identities entered the mix of Australian life. The experiences of women, as an outcome of second wave feminism, or of minorities, came under scrutiny. Indigenous cultures and politics began to assert themselves more and more, and Indigenous people began to take control of their own representations and direction. New technologies, from personal computers to home video cameras, have opened up new means of communication, and placed these in the hands of ‘amateurs’ as well as professionals. In the process, society has grown more sophisticated about new media and how it can be manipulated.

An increased interest in social justice issues saw the nature and uses of history being critically reassessed. There was a reaction against official histories. History from below, as it came to be called in the 1960s and 1970s, sought to rescue the poor, the working classes and others, from oblivion, or what had been ‘hidden from history’. It also asserted that history was not only the preserve of professional or academic historians. The work of amateur groups of local historians, using local records, such as parish registers and oral histories, began

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to record the workings of everyday life and ‘ordinary’ people.67 These practices had prompted a carryover effect, such as discussion about who has ‘the right to speak’ in the museum, and whose voices are heard (the politics of identity), the museum was no longer seen as simply the realm of the professional specialist. The view of the museum as an archive was questioned, as was the inheritance of the early modern museum as a tool of education to create suitable citizens (this kind of education now occurs in so many other forms in Australia, from universal school education to electronic media).68 The museum has become a site of interpretation and multiple viewpoints, recognising that a belief in one ‘official’ story is no longer seen by most historians as valid.

Museums now, in the 21st century, are increasingly seen as places where many voices can be heard, like the democratic discourse (though limited) possible in internet communication and unavailable in news media, frequently controlled by powerful elites. Museums are coming to be seen as cultural or community centres — one of the places in contemporary life where debate can occur in a climate of equality and tolerance. Now almost a cliché, they are often invoked as ‘safe places for unsafe ideas’.69 The idea of the new museum has become that of a ‘forum’— a place where public debate occurs on issues of importance to the community.70 Paradoxically, this is occurring at a time when, according to thinkers like Habermas71, the notion of a public sphere for rational debate and

69 Museologist Elaine Heumann Gurian was one of the first to refer to the museum this way and has discussed it in many forums, including in 2002, ‘Museums today – panacea or provocateur?’ forum at the National Museum of Australia 26 February. Her use of this term was also referred by Stephen Weil in 1997 in ‘The museum and the public’, Museum Management and Curatorship. Vol. 16, No. 3, p. 266.
70 See Dawn Casey’s use of the term ‘forum’ and the new definitions of museums cited in the Introduction.
presentation of different viewpoints is being eroded, and the ethical dimension of cultural communication is subsumed in a consumer marketplace in which economics becomes the basis for all exchange. Given this erosion of the public sphere, the museum has come to be seen as one of the few places where discourse can be fostered, one of the few places where free, rational and informed debate can occur, albeit an idealised vision of the museum’s capacity as a public institution. In a sense, the museum has been identified as a place in which the public sphere may be recovered.

It is also interesting to note however that the interest in ‘community’ that began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s was occurring at a time when Australia and many other western societies were becoming characterised by a rising tide of individualism (partly as a factor of ever-increasing consumerism in the west – perhaps one could say ‘niche groups’).\textsuperscript{72} This was paralleled with increased investigations of anti-colonial themes and questions in museums, as reflections were made on the disjunctures of history.\textsuperscript{73} Additionally, the term ‘community’ was itself under deconstruction – no longer an undifferentiated mass, but a collection of varying interest groups or demographics with quite particular constituencies and points of focus.\textsuperscript{74}

The use of technology predicts a new relationship to the museum object/artefact itself. If the ‘modern’ art museum handles objects in the same way that, for example, modern art produces them, then they enter the museum in effect as ‘found objects’ engaged in an institutional game of validation. The

\textsuperscript{72} Margaret Thatcher famously remarked that ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women...’ 31 October 1987, Women’s Own magazine. This is also discussed in Putnam, Robert, 2000, Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of America’s social capital. New York, Simon and Schuster.

\textsuperscript{73} For reflections on new approaches to history see the essays in Benson, Susan Porter, Brier, Stephen and Rosenzweig (eds.), 1986, Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public. Philadelphia, Temple University Press; and McIntyre, Stuart, and Clark, Anna, 2003, The History Wars, Carlton, Melbourne University Press.

visiting public views them as already authenticated and having a particular significance – as indicated by the fact of display, by labels identifying them as the work of an authority figure, and by extended labels explaining their cultural ‘value’. Equally, in the ‘modern’ history museum, objects are subjected to the same process of authentication or validation. If not, history museums refer to such ‘non-collection’ items as ‘props’ – like a Hollywood stage set. The baby’s black matinée outfit in the NMA collection, for example, must have an authentic provenance connecting it to Azaria Chamberlain, before it has meaning or value. On the other hand, technology in the ‘post-modern’ museum deals not with objects, but with images or concepts that have become hyper real or virtual. They are no longer assumed to be always authenticated, but are signs that circulate in a system that is ultimately trans-institutional. The image, removed or distanced from the physical context of object and museum display, are free to find other links and significance. The meaning of the ‘historical’ object has radically shifted.

So, as reported from a 1999 public lecture by scholar David Lowenthal, author of the influential book _The Past is a Foreign Country_:

“Museums have changed organically”. At the end of the last century they were driven by imperialist nationalist motives that led to large collections on static display. Now they were being asked to do the opposite, Modern museums were required to have a more social-service function... Demands for ...

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75 In Australia, Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton at the University of Technology, Sydney, conducted a survey on the significance of history in schools. Their conclusions included that Australians learn more about the past from film, television and museums than they do from formal education. See Ashton, Paul, Connors, Jane, Goodall, Heather, Hamilton, Paula and McCarthy, Louella, ‘The Australians and the Past at the University of Technology Sydney’ in _Public History Review_, Vol. 8, 2000, pp. 168-173.

76 The case of the death of baby Azaria Chamberlain near Uluru was highly publicized; her mother Lindy Chamberlain, even before being indicted for the baby’s murder, was ‘tried’ in the press because her Seventh Day Adventist beliefs were seen as suspect or even peculiar. The fact that Mrs Chamberlain had a black matinée outfit for her baby daughter was seen by the press as almost satanic.

authenticity, the expression of subaltern viewpoints and for populist modes of display were transforming museum practice...conflict arose when the public demanded modern museums fill both roles.  

In the light of this rhetoric surrounding the new museology and an emerging new model of Australian culture and society, the NMA sought to position itself as what might be called a ‘post-modern’ institution. It presented itself as a site of pluralist approaches – offering many different stories and viewpoints, querying the grand narratives that were a feature of academic or official histories (‘modern’ histories) from the Enlightenment onwards. These were the grand statements of modernity that the NMA was seeking to deconstruct. No longer, in post-modern thought, is it possible to see history as a story of evolutionary progress, from darkness into light. Lyotard suggested post-modern approaches to history should deal with discontinuities and fragmentation, ‘little narratives’ rather than simply replacing the old grand narratives with new grand ones. Embedded in this is the idea that grand narratives were told by dominant classes and groups to validate their own power. Lyotard felt it was necessary to disrupt these narratives and thereby reveal the tensions and elisions within and around them.

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79 Even by calling itself a museum of social history the NMA is constructed as taking a critical approach to the conventions and assumptions of official histories of the past. See also comments of curator Guy Hansen reported in the press when he referred to the ‘absence of a popular, grand narrative of Australian history’ in Szego, Julie, 2001, ‘Museum offers tangled vision of Australia’ in Age, 10 March, p. 13.  
Of course, all this represents the more 'radical' end of museology. Older notions of the museum have not entirely disappeared. There are museums across Australia that have adopted only some of the ideas of the 'new museum', whilst others have resisted much of it. Many art museums and natural science/history museums have continued to adhere to the paradigms and tropes of their own particular disciplines, thus perpetuating certain 'grand narratives' of their own.\(^{81}\) Whether that of art history or natural evolution, they produce their own frameworks in which only certain knowledge is admitted, while other kinds of knowledge are excluded. Is there an element of this occurring in the NMA? Has the NMA actually achieved such a post-modern rendition of history?

The knowledge being used in the NMA is avowedly multidisciplinary. It declares itself as ‘combining ‘traditional’ history (economic history, political history) with the ‘new’ social histories developed since the 1970s (migration history, urban history) and the more recent innovations of environmental history and personal history.'\(^{82}\) It draws on far more than just archival historical material, using oral histories, anthropology and archaeology, scientific knowledge across many fields, art, geography, film history, technology and more. Its investigations are broad-ranging and attempt to bring new perspectives to historical studies.

The NMA has had to create this approach in a climate of externally forced changes in museum environments — viz. marketplace policies, profit/revenue-raising or a degree of self-funding, user-pays, shopping in the museum — consumer society, new management styles that have become more corporate than scholarly.\(^{83}\) Prior to opening there was talk of entry charges to the museum, however in January 2001 the Government agreed to a one year trial of free admission (and charges for special exhibitions). The museum had argued that

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81 For example the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, continues to tell a story of art predicated on a chronology of succeeding artistic movements and styles.
83 Lianne McTavish explores the contradictions of commercialism and the desire for a democratic museum using the Louvre as a case study. These contradictions are also evident in *footnote continues overleaf*. 

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Free entry was an important part of fulfilling its mission to be a 'people's museum' and to attract larger numbers of visitors. Free admission has, to date, remained, although its continuation is not guaranteed.

In 1999, Dawn Casey, the fifth Director of the Museum, came to the job only two years before the building was due to open, replacing the departing Dr. Bill Jonas, a Worimi man from the Karuah River area of NSW. Casey, also an Indigenous person and career public servant, had been in charge of the building project. Now she faced the huge task of getting the institution ready in an abbreviated time frame and, in the last few months of 2000, began talking up its mission, vision and opening exhibitions. She came to an organisation which had already formulated strong policies for its future.

For example, the NMA’s 1997-2002 Corporate Plan affirmed that the museum ‘will be a multidisciplinary organisation, creating new knowledge and remaining responsive to the wealth of new ideas about this country and its people.’ By the end of its first year of operation, it had formulated some major strategic objectives. These included:

- to be the most talked about museum in the country;
- an international authority on Australian history and culture, with special expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture; to contribute to the understandings of contemporary issues — offering a venue for reflection and a forum for debate; a recognised role in national debates — a

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84 Unfortunately, the lack of an entry fee was countered by the Government’s requirement that the Museum meet a $4.2 million revenue target. The following year (2002), when this target was not met and the NMA had had huge attendance figures, the Government was forced to increase it’s funding to the Museum. In May 2002 it was given an additional $37.2 million over 4 years. $16 million was stripped from the budget of the National Archives to pay for it.

85 Previous Directors had all endured years of waiting for the Museum project to be given the green light by government. See Appendix B for details.

86 Corporate Plan 1997 – 2002, NMA Website, p.1


Obviously strategically positioning itself as the premier history museum in the country, this is one of the clearest statements that the museum saw itself in a central role in national debate. This, however, was not new, but in fact a continuation of the policies alluded to in the Pigott Report and affirmed in the 1982 Interim Council Report. The museum, despite having five Directors before its opening day, and many changes of staff, remained remarkably committed to its original vision.

The museum’s statement of vision was ‘The National Museum of Australia – exploring the past, illuminating the present and imagining the future’,\footnote{Vision Statement on NMA website, \url{www.nma.gov.au} [First accessed: 21.4.2002].} and its statement of purpose says that ‘the National Museum of Australia through its collections and programs promotes awareness and understanding of Australia’s cultures, histories and environments’.\footnote{Statement of purpose on NMA website, \url{www.nma.gov.au} [First accessed: 21.4.2002].} While the vision’s inclusion of the future\footnote{Re including the future: In 2000 the National Museum of Australia Amendment Bill gave the museum greater powers, and particularly allowed the NMA to expand its capacity to include the future in its programs, as well as the past. See Parliament of Australia Bills Digest No. 85, 2000 – 01, \textit{National Museum of Australia Amendment Bill 2000}, \url{www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2000-01/01bd085.htm} [Accessed: 12.11.03]; See also 2000, ‘More Powers for National Museum Under New Bill’, Australian Associated Press, 5 December, at \url{http://global.factiva.com/en/arch/display.asp} [Accessed: 2.6.2003].} suggests a very different attitude to the uses of history, its statement of purpose is safely indeterminate and all-encompassing. More revealing expressions are found in the museum’s 2003 Ethics Statement. In addition to provisions for the proper approach to its stewardship of objects and their associated intellectual property, particularly of Indigenous material, it documents an important set of values about the museum. These include the following statements:
The National Museum acknowledges that frameworks of knowledge and interpretation are constructed within social settings. This requires a willingness to present contingent and conflicting views as well as a recognition that the Museum may arouse a controversy.

This is an interesting point because it was made in full knowledge of the controversy that had already erupted over the Museum’s interpretations of history (as will be discussed in chapter six) and indicates a continued commitment to acknowledge divergent views. Further, the Museum reinforced its policy of involving communities in its work...

The National Museum is committed to the enhancement of mutual understanding [my emphasis] of cultural diversity. Such diversity must be reflected in the Museum’s collections, public and outreach programs, policies and practices, the compositions of boards/communities, staffing profile and the audiences it serves. In this way the Museum will:

- Involve communities in the interpretation, documentation and representation of their tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage;
- Respond to community needs in the preservation and representation of their cultural aspirations and heritage...91

Does the museum, in fact, present contingent and conflicting views? What does it mean by its use of the term ‘cultural diversity’? As well as involving communities and responding to their needs (which are determined by whom?) and in the context of a ‘forum’ which implies at least two-way communication, can communities respond? And is it possible for that to happen in the same medium, such as an exhibition context, or framework, as the work the community is responding to? To answer these questions we must first look at the actual practices of the Museum.

The first exhibitions

When the Museum opened in March 2001 it presented five permanent, or long term, exhibitions, each relating to the three main themes - Australian society and its history since 1788, the interaction of people with the Australian environment, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories (or Land, Nation, People – an extension of the Pigott vision). Temporary exhibitions, which have entry fees, aim to capture the visitor soon after entering the building. These permanent exhibitions are physically located in the main body of the building, which, in an ironic twist, given the rhetoric of both institution and architects, creates an almost corridor-like container that evokes an impression of a single story being told from start to finish, albeit in a roundabout style.92 The exhibitions were created by curatorial teams, albeit with a specialist curator taking the lead, and have drawn on the NMA’s National Historical Collection, as well as loans, to tell the stories. Like all large museums, the NMA observes the highest professional standards of collection management (in registration, cataloguing, handling, conservation and storage) and these systems influence the use of objects in exhibitions.

The first of the permanent exhibitions, Tangled Destinies; Land and People in Australia, charted the relationship and interaction with the land – a history of its natural history. In particular, it looked at Australian plants and animals; native species and extinctions; biological colonisation of Australia (by, for example, the rabbit and the prickly pear); agriculture; city life (in a very truncated form); climatic changes and endemic climatic factors such as fire. The alien nature of Australia to the first white settlers and their misconceptions and devastating impact on the land was told, not as a single story, but in a series of vignettes, describing adaptations and accommodations - these contrasting with the

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92 Angela Philp, field notes, 2001 – 2003. I undertook extensive field investigation of NMA exhibitions over a two and a half year period.
adaptive use of the land by Indigenous people. The series of stories presented were intended to ‘draw visitors in, and help them reflect on their own ideas about land.’\textsuperscript{93} There is little, though, to assist the visitor in this task (while some objects may provoke personal memories - and the visitor’s own lived experience is critical) – there is often a need for ‘keys’ to make connections with broader issues. The title \textit{Tangled Destinies} refers to the complexity of European and Indigenous comprehensions of the land. As museologist Linda Young suggests ‘themes of black and white understanding of the land are shown connected to each other in a way that could reshape contemporary Australian consciousness. Fundamental complementarity of ideas and feelings about the land could be a reconciliation far more profound than political ceremony’\textsuperscript{94} Curated by Dr Mike Smith (an archaeologist and Director of Research and Development at the NMA), many experts and specialists from a variety of disciplines were called upon to contribute to the content of the exhibition, and a series of workshops and summits on the theme added to the mix, reinforcing the Museum’s commitment to acknowledge and include contingent and conflicting views.\textsuperscript{95} It was an ambitious and fresh approach to the powerful impact of the Australian continent on its peoples.

Yet there are several problems that emerge. The exhibition is not extensive and its ambitions are not matched by its content, which leaves the visitor with a very simple ‘snapshot’ of the issues.\textsuperscript{96} There is a considerable amount of text, on labels of varying sizes and styles, which overwhelms (and sometimes even physically obscures) the objects. This produces one of the great problems of

\textsuperscript{96} The critiquing session on the exhibition, held at the museum in 2003, noted that it ‘tended to create a “snapshot”, impressionistic experience’. This was reported by Louise Douglas and Vicki Northey, in ‘Critiquing “Tangled Destinies” The National Museum’s Environmental History Exhibition’, in \textit{Museum National}, May 2003, p. 26. I also attended the critiquing session. \textit{footnote continues overleaf}
social history exhibitions — when text is dominant, an exhibition can become like a book on the wall. Yet surely one of the things which marks the museum's difference is the use of objects and material culture to tell stories. If the object is relegated to the status of a prop to the text, rather than the text helping the viewer to understand what the object can reveal or demonstrate, then there seems little point in doing an exhibition — a book might have been a better choice.

Perhaps one of the ways around this is to consider the whole history of an object, rather than just what it might illustrate in one story. Even the signs of wear and tear (or lack of) can be potent reminders of the object's part in lived experience, whether it was part of everyday life, or only for 'best'. Certainly objects are repositories of memory too. Rather than starting a story and looking for ways to illustrate it, perhaps starting with the object and seeing if it offers up many stories or alternative takes on a story might yield more profitable results.\(^9\) This is as much an issue for art museums as it is for museums of social history, especially if the expressed intent of the museum is to question or take apart grand narratives, rather than simply replacing them with new substitutes. In *Tangled Destinies* this is generally done well, for example, when highlighting the inventiveness of Myles Dunphy's bush pram, made to be collapsible so that Miles could take his baby son Milo on bush walks in the 1930s. Some parts though, fare less well, with objects sometimes even obscured from view by the variety of labels on both display shelves and their glass fronts. This is more than just an issue of design — it suggests a deliberate choice to privilege text over object. It should be noted however that NMA curators (content developers, as they were then called) did not have much input into the design of the exhibitions, which was in the hands of a Boston, USA-based firm, Anway and

Company, in association with Amaze Design Inc and DMCD Inc of New York. Nevertheless, as an early exhibition brief declares, the aim of curators was to chronicle changing attitudes to land, as much as shifting uses of it. In reference to the responses of settlers, the exhibition brief noted that ‘in a sense, “discovery” of the land was also an intellectual discovery of an Indigenous Australia with its own cosmologies and natural history’ – so the exhibition, itself a journey of intellectual discovery, remains unresolved in its understanding of the relationship between object and text.

In *Nation: Symbols of Australia* (now removed as part of a major redevelopment of the exhibitions) we were shown how a ‘nation’ can be invented - like Benedict Anderson’s imagined political community - through the sense of belonging and attachment that can be associated with icons and symbols, whether official (like the rising sun of the insignia on the diggers’ hat) or popular (like associations with the Vegemite logo or the QANTAS kangaroo). These symbolic bonds of community are formed in tradition, and in memory, and made tangible in the museum. This exhibition created great controversy because instead of repeating the iconic stories of Australia – the ANZAC myth, for instance – ‘banal’ and ‘heroic’ episodes are given equal weight. Where once we might have been presented with a sustained narrative of a triumphal ‘progress’ of the Australian nation, now we were given items for contemplation rather than an historical narrative, an understanding of stereotypes rather than a celebration of them.

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98 Interview with Louise Douglas, General Manager, Public Programs and Audience Development, 2002, with author, 26 March.
100 This exhibition was removed in 2005 as part of the changes resulting from the 2003 Review of the Museum. See chapter seven for an expanded discussion of this Review.
In *Eternity: Stories from the Emotional Heart of Australia* a series of small displays creates vignettes of both famous and ordinary Australians, under the rubric of a range of emotions, varying from *Mystery* and *Hope* to *Joy, Loneliness* and *Fear*. Intended to provide insights into the diverse lives of people linked to critical movements, trends, activities or key historical events (that is, implying a significance in the choices), the exhibition focuses on individuals and our responses to their stories (and visitors are invited to tell their own stories in video booths). It is extremely cramped (it was already halved before opening), often reducing the subjects to token tales, and the audio sequences often compete with each other in the same space, which mitigates against any opportunity to personally relate to the individual stories. The title refers to an itinerant preacher, Arthur Stace, who, in Sydney in the mid twentieth century, wrote the word ‘Eternity’ all over the city, encouraging people to repent. Perhaps intended to indicate personal passion, the title is strangely disembodied from the stories being told. Yet the inclusive nature of the types of people selected presented an alternative to a more traditional and highly selective approach that would only have celebrated important national figures. It is interesting to compare this with the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* which, since Volume One, has attempted to include ordinary people in its selection. Similarly, *Eternity* attempts to make ordinary Australians the subjects of history, as much as political leaders or visionaries.

*Horizons: Peopling of Australia since 1788* dealt with Australian identity – as a settler society – and with relations between Aboriginal people and settlers.

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103 See 2003, *Review of the National Museum of Australia, Its Exhibitions and Public Programs: A Report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia, July, Commonwealth of Australia*, pp. 13, 23, 33, 37. It is notable that the Review concluded that the *Eternity* gallery was ‘a remarkable achievement’ and considered it ‘successful at combining the criteria functions of arousing and satisfying curiosity, education and entertainment.’


105 This exhibition was also removed in 2005 as part of the response to the Review.
Convicts, free settlers, trade, population movements, political links, migrants and refugees all figured, as did the ‘White Australia’ policy and sectarianism. Australia was seen through the experiences of ordinary people – how policies affected them, what their expectations were, and how the reality of life in Australia began to change outlooks and interactions between people. Again the visitor was able to select stories to focus on, but they were not interwoven into a wider narrative. Unfortunately, the location of this exhibition on a mezzanine floor physically isolated it from other areas, distancing it from the other exhibition themes and disallowing any potential dialogue between them.

The most successful and widely acclaimed of the opening exhibitions however was, and remains in 2005, First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People which will also be discussed in chapter four. This explores the diverse cultures and 60,000 year histories of Australia’s Indigenous people, including attachments to land and sea and the history of contact with settler society. The history of contact, violent and non-violent, includes mission life, the removal of children, civil rights and land rights. Indigenous peoples’ own voices are heard in this space, and art is successfully incorporated with objects of material culture, interactive displays and documentary material. Each is in dialogue with the other. First Australians confronts both the uglier aspects of the history of contact, while also being celebratory and respectful. Unfortunately, First Australians is, like Horizons, physically isolated from the rest of the exhibition spaces, and, located at the very end of one’s passage through the museum, seems to exist in a space of the ‘other’. While the other four thematic areas variously incorporated Indigenous material, there is little to connect them clearly with what we learn in First Australians, and indeed, all the themes needed clear points of contact to help the visitor make their own connections.

Innovations in the NMA included the extensive use of new technologies, with electronic and computer display methods, computer access in exhibition spaces, a rotating theatre (Circa) with an audio-visual introduction to the museum’s main themes, interactive information kiosks, surround-sound audio and vibration-
sensitive carpet which triggers sound and graphic effects. These technologies are aimed at producing an active visitor, one who may then participate in the public debates that the Museum encourages. The Broadcast Studio, with a green room, can beam live into television programs, run video-conferencing across Australia or the world, or participate in multi-site webcasts, and has been used for many public forums and discussions. The museum is also looking at opportunities to narrowcast and video-conference education programs to schools across Australia. These facilities have a ready appeal to the computer-literate and younger visitors to the museum for whom this is a natural part of their contemporary environment. For others it has seemed all too ‘Disney’ and alien in its novelty. Journalist Angela Shanahan, a vociferous critic of the Museum, complained that

With the help of technology – which tends to do the thinking for you – modern museums subtly prepackage our past. They have moved away from presenting objects. The technology encourages the interpretive feel of something rather than focusing on facts. Hence the National Museum has a ride that presents feel-good images of Australia on big screens... [it] is a colourful, historical theme park...106

The allegation of pre-packaging is ironic given the commitment to the new museology. Director Dawn Casey had prefigured the use of advanced technology prior to opening, saying its use will ‘dispel the notion of audiences as passive receivers of information’.107 Further to the criticisms of journalists however, another museum director entered the fray. Tim Flannery, a naturalist and Director of the South Australian Museum, objected to the large-scale use of inter-active exhibits (calling them ‘Disneyland displays’) saying that this was

money that should be spent on research.\textsuperscript{108} Research is of course an essential component of the work of any museum, though former NMA staff member Stephen Foster makes reference to ‘an ill-informed dictate from its financial masters that the museum should not engage in research’.\textsuperscript{109} However the type of research that Flannery referred to was traditional academic research undertaken by specialists and that particularly values analytic approaches over other types of knowledge. This view of museum practice implies that there is a hierarchy of values within the museum that ultimately excludes those without access to that knowledge. As a public institution, museums are not in a position to ignore the great variety of needs, knowledge and experience that their visitors bring with them and must use every available means to provide access. With this in mind display areas are set aside around the museum to allow for quick responses to current issues and public forums were, and continue to be, held frequently to allow experts, special interest groups and members of the public to have informed debates about important national issues. This is surely a way in which the Museum is responding to the challenge of the public sphere that Habermas has called for.\textsuperscript{110} The Museum is offering the means to situate debate in the context of information and the diverse views that encase it. This provides the visitor with opportunities to discuss issues with their companions in the museum or to participate in the forums on offer. Topics for forums have ranged from megafauna or Australians in Antarctica to Native Title, the role of museums and frontier conflict in Australia.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{108} Reported in Di Girolamo, Rebecca, 2001, ‘Research dying art in “super” museums’ in Australian, 25 July, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{110} By ‘challenge’, I am referring to Habermas’s belief in the possibility of reviving an activist public sphere as in his Theory of Communicative Action, Vols. 1 and 2.
\textsuperscript{111} For example, Museums: Panacea or Provocateur? was held on 26 February 2002, Australians in Antarctica on 4 – 5 October 2001, and Native Title on 2 June 2002. These forums usually include an invited panel of experts/specialists who represent the range of views on a topic and who are then able to engage with the other participants.
Public programs have been a major focus of the opening years of the NMA and diverse audiences are catered for in sometimes quite creative ways. Among sites and activities for children and students is kSpace: creating a city of the future. This area uses computers to engage children in creating their own future visions, relating their work to explorations in the museum and presenting results in a sophisticated 3D theatre. Discovery Zones, with story-telling and hands-on activities, are found throughout exhibition areas, as is Our Place, which actually consists of four cubbies (a treehouse, tankstand, backyard cubby and magic wardrobe) as special discovery places. Talkback classroom, initially run by ABC youth radio station Triple J, allowed secondary students to create their own real radio programs in which they interview politicians and other high-profile Australians about matters of national significance. Guests have included Prime Minister John Howard, Opposition Leaders Simon Crean and subsequently Mark Latham, and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. Participants investigate issues through media production and hone their broadcast and journalistic skills before going on air. It remains one of the most original programs in the museum. In the spirit of the earliest visions for the museum, live theatre and performance activate public areas and provide new means of access to information and understanding. Similarly, the Skylounge program ran a series of cinema screenings in the Garden of Australian Dreams, aimed at bringing older youth into the museum. The NMA’s emphasis on the importance of diverse and active programming has contributed to its enormous popularity with visitors. Public response has been overwhelmingly positive — visitors numbers have been huge and their reactions positive, reaching a million just a little after the Museum’s first year. As well it has faced criticism and antipathy

112 Simon Crean was interviewed for Talkback Classroom on 27 March, 2002; Alexander Downer on 14 May 2003; John Howard on 4 June 2003; and Mark Latham on 26 November 2003.

113 See performance reports in NMA Annual Reports on the website (www.nma.gov.au). The NMA has a team dedicated to Evaluation and Visitor Research (managed by Susan Tonkin) and information on museum surveys may be found at www.nma.gov.au/about_us/corporate_documents/evaluation_and_visitor_research/. See Appendix C.
from several sources, including its own governing Council, as will be seen in chapter six.

One way of thinking about the model of the 'new' museum that the NMA purports to present, is to consider the influence of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified as two models of democracy – the 'pedagogic' and the 'performative'. He describes the 'pedagogic' model as an analytic form, originating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wherein the right to citizenship called for suitable forms of education. Whatever form this education took, it emphasised the capacity for abstract conceptualisation and reasoning. As Chakrabarty noted, 'abstract reasoning made it possible for the citizen to conceptualise such imaginary entities as “class”, “public”, or “national” interest and adjudicate between competing claims.'\(^{114}\) This is still a very dominant model for understanding in contemporary Australian society. Chakrabarty describes his other model as 'performative' or 'lived'. In this model, a person is already accorded all the rights of citizenship simply by virtue of living in society. There is no prerequisite education in the concept of universal adult franchise and it is part of a global trend. This model brings the embodied and the sensual into play – 'lived' experience, Habermas's lifeworld. The 'lived' assumes the realm of common understandings and values, as in Habermas's lifeworld.

In mass-consumer liberal democracies both of these models apply to the way we are constituted as citizens. In the museum, says Chakrabarty, there is a growing tension between these notions of 'analytic' and 'lived'. In the light of new cultural relativism, diversity and the politics of identity, the canons of western democracies have been challenged. Where usually the 'analytic' is privileged over the 'lived' or experience, the latter is now increasingly asserted. (Compare to, for example, Tim Flannery's position on the nature of research.) Academic disciplines like history have struggled to incorporate the 'lived', but there

\(^{114}\) Chakrabarty, 2002, op. cit, p. 5.
remains a tension between them. As Chakrabarty notes 'in opening themselves up to the politics of experience, museums have gradually moved away from the archives...in the democracy of the masses and the media, the realms of the embodied are increasingly politically powerful.' Chakrabarty's work has the potential to extend Habermas's concept of the public sphere. This opens the museum up to the public sphere, to the lifeworld, and the possibility of communication based on the lived, and not the unequal power of the system. In this sense, the lived can become a context for communicative action, especially as lifeworld relationships are increasingly mediated by power and money. New relationships to knowledge and the creation of 'new knowledge', as the NMA itself has aimed to do, inevitably unsettle our expectations of the museum. Certainly this has been evident in some of the debates surrounding the NMA. Experience (whether oral testimony, or the 'emotion' of exhibitions like *Eternity*) is considered by critics of the museum, as will be discussed in chapter six, to be essentially flawed because it is 'untheoretical', it disrupts the view of institutional knowledge as secure and stable, that we, as a society, have been reared to expect. Yet the very fact that critics are able to engage this debate within the museum may be evidence of its success.

**Conclusion**

Is the NMA a 'post-modern' museum? It has certainly questioned and attempted to deconstruct one of its major operating frameworks — that of history. The paradigm of 'the nation' remains, inevitably, given the title and charter of the Museum. While under radical review, it could still be said that 'nation' and 'nationalism' continue to operate as meta-narratives informing the activities and interpretations of the Museum. Perhaps even more significant though is the nature of museology itself. The museological tenets of professional specialisation, the object and collecting as core elements, the exhibitionary milieu and the organisational culture of the museum still have a canonical place. These

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115 ibid., p. 9.
are more than just 'practices'. They operate as meta-narratives because of the way in which all other knowledge in the museum is subordinated to them. Museology is not the content or subject-matter of the museum, like history is, but logically stands apart from it or above it. So, while the NMA attempts to deconstruct its subject-matter (history, nation) it still finds itself governed by the overlaid modern narratives of museology. Its 'post-modernity' sits like a layer on an essentially modern base. Perhaps it is less of a radical shift from the appearance of the National Gallery in 1982 than it at first seems. To explore this proposition, we must first look at the museological shifts that influenced Australia in the intervening years.
Part Two: An ensemble of communication acts

3

A sea change? Shifts in museological theory and practice in Australia

The period 1982 to 2003 marks not only the space between the opening of the NGA and the NMA, but was also witness to the development of new concepts of culture in Australia. Just as the then named Australian National Gallery opened its doors, a new wave of theoretical, cultural and critical perspectives, which had been developing over the previous twenty years, really began to take hold in Australian society. No longer were these perspectives concerned so much with nationalism. Rather, new critiques of culture and new critical approaches to history began to emerge. In the process the museum was increasingly recognised as an active participant in the construction of culture and history. Museum audiences, and potential audiences, began to be constructed as participants rather than just observers in this process.\(^1\) Beliefs in innovation, meta-narratives of culture and history, expressions of patriarchy, colonial-settler

society narratives, and issues of cultural autonomy were all called into question, and the social and ultimately economic realities of culture were examined. Post-modern and post-colonial ideas, particularly in the 1980s, created a kind of convulsion in Australia. The 'new' or critical museology began to influence the museum profession and encouraged significant change in attitudes to the role of the museum. The question of what a 'post-modern' or new museum might be and how it measured up against the modern museum became critical to the museum field in this country.

The 'New museology': the canons of the museum and the seeds of dissent

The 'new museology', a term popularized by a collection of essays under the same title, set about questioning the nature of the museum and its relationship to its audiences. As Peter Vergo declared, 'what is wrong with the “old” museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums'. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, museum collections typically represented the so-called 'high points' of culture and history — the actions and expressions of political and social elites — and taxonomic coverage of natural history through extensive collections of specimens. They were places for study and general edification.

From around 1880 to 1920 museums, particularly in Europe, North America and Australasia, were interested in processes of modernisation, that is, in solving practical problems associated with techniques and procedures, and with a new emphasis on education. A further change began to take place internationally in the period from around 1960 to 1980, when many museums came to see

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themselves as social institutions and their activities as political in the broadest sense. The Pigott Report into Museums in Australia, published in 1975, affirmed these new directions and by the early 1980s this was beginning to have a practical impact on museum activities in Australia.

Similarly, in 1946, when it began, the general policy and objectives of ICOM (a UNESCO-linked NGO – the International Council of Museums) focused primarily on the status and development of the museum profession. The development of museology was coterminous with the professionalisation of museum work. As such, it was necessary to carve out an area of specialist knowledge that in the first instance covered the methods and techniques of museums. The practices of collecting, preservation and research were thus the very basis of the professionalisation of museum work. Even the practice of temporary exhibitions, compared to the display of permanent collections, was still a subsidiary and infrequent task. In 1956 ICOM defined a museum as

any permanent establishment, administered in the general interest, for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction groups of objects and specimens of cultural value: artistic, historical, scientific and technological collections, botanical and zoological gardens and aquariums. Public libraries and public archival institutions maintaining permanent exhibition rooms shall be considered to be museums.

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While this definition was inclusive of a wide variety of institutions, the emphasis was still on preservation, research and education, with exhibitions as the means to promote this emphasis. In many ways this focus has not diminished. Yet new ideas were emerging and began to put pressure on museums to manifest some response.

The changing nature of the field was identified in the 1971 9th General Congress of ICOM (held in Grenoble and Paris) in which the accent was now on the potential role of museums in society. This led, as mentioned in the Introduction, to revised Statutes being adopted at the next General Conference (1974, Copenhagen) and in 1974 the ICOM definition of a museum had evolved to include a description of the museum as an ‘institution in the service of society and its development’.7 (The definition had now also expanded to include, amongst others, natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites, nature reserves and planetariums.) By 2001 the same definition was expanded to include even more new institutions, such as cultural centres and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity); non-profit art exhibition galleries; and non-profit institutions or organisations undertaking conservation, research, education, training, documentation and other activities relating to museums and museology.8

By defining the museum as an institution ‘in the service of society’ the museum field had shifted its focus from an emphasis on more inward-looking aspects of academic disciplines, scholarly research and connoisseurship (not that these had disappeared) to a new interest in audiences, particularly their experiences of the museum and the alienation of many, save for a few social and intellectual elites.

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for whom the museum environment was ‘naturalised’ as a part of their own cultural milieu.9

The development of a new or critical museology sought a more active social role for museums. Rather than defining necessary actions or rules or being simply descriptive or empirical, it advocates attitudes and questioning. New museology therefore looks to community development and the ‘presentation and preservation of heritage are considered with the context of social action and change’.10 Collections specialist Deirdre Stam11 argues that ‘the new museology questions traditional museum approaches to issues of value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority and authenticity’.12 In other words, every aspect of the museum is treated as deserving of critical assessment to articulate its unconscious dispositions or prejudices as well as overt and covert influences. Yet by the late twentieth century museums worldwide were also having to deal with pressures to become more entrepreneurial and to be as much sources of entertainment and sites for tourism, as of knowledge and education. This apparently Janus-faced identity continues to trouble many (though not all) museums, especially in attempts to be democratic sites of debate and social inclusion. I will return to this in later chapters.

In the humanities, new disciplinary approaches have developed, for instance the ‘new art history’ and ‘social history’.13 For art history, connoisseurship and analyses of style and iconography have been ostensibly replaced with what has been described as ‘the impact of feminist, marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic

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11 Deirdre Stam is Associate Professor of Library Science at Long Island University and a specialist in the analysis of collections.
13 These terms have become common shorthand for new developments in the disciplines of history and art history. The ‘new art history’ was first used in the mid 1970s when T.J. Clark ran a course on the social history of art at Leeds University. Subsequently, new approaches were foregrounded in the art journal Block. ‘History from below’ (associated with the journal History
and socio-political ideas on a discipline notorious for its conservative taste in art and its orthodoxy in research'. Similarly, aspects of social history have been influenced by these and subsequent theoretical dispositions. Frequently described as 'history from below', it enlarges the field by including the stories of minorities or the repressed — for instance, Indigenous peoples, women, labour, migrants, incorporating post colonial discourses — and uses devices such as oral testimony and a new openness to community participation in exhibition research and development. Rather than focusing on political leaders, economic history or military history, social history is more concerned with social trends, mores and behaviours. It is grass roots history in the sense that it shows how ordinary people influence and shape history.

In much the same way, anthropologist James Clifford has argued for new roles for curators — rather than transmitting authoritative knowledge, he proposes them as cross-cultural mediators between objects and societies, allowing the free play of conversation (or communication) instead of a one-way monologue. Similarly, Tony Bennett, sociologist and author of The Birth of the Museum (1995), argues that

a politics of knowledge in relation to the museum does not concern merely the content of knowledge. How the social relations of knowledge are organised in terms of the distribution of roles between different participants in the museum scene — curators,

and I would add educators as well

members of communities, visitors — is an equally important question that involves, among other issues, the relations between the senses that are produced by different articulations of the relations between words

Workshop), emerged in the early 1960s and was often associated with historians of the labour movement.

15 Clifford, James, 1997, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, Harvard University Press.
Bennett’s plea for recognition of the social relations of knowledge is one that has found greater resonance in museums of social history than those of the visual arts. It must be asked whether this is because the subjects of social history exhibitions and collections are more readily recognised as part of broader social relationships and thus might be thought more capable of dealing with a range of languages - oral, written, aural or spatial? Bennett continued:

It will only be by experimentally tinkering with these aspects of museum display that the days of the “expert as showman” can give way to new forms of expertise that, in facilitating a less hierarchical exchange of perspectives, may allow a renovation of the museum’s earlier conception as a conversable civic space that — going beyond the social confines of its Renaissance predecessor — functions across the relations between different cultures.17

This ‘less hierarchical exchange of perspectives’ admits not only the relations between the senses but also the possibility, as Bennett noted, of a more democratic debate in a cultural public sphere. However I argue that the hierarchy of the expert or specialist appears to be less in question in the art museum. While history is no longer always the preserve of the specialist (consider the number of people undertaking their own family or local histories18), art history has not become a popular movement, though perhaps it might be identified in the passion for creating individual ‘style’, in clothing or home décor, that sets one apart from others, signifying a person of taste or discrimination? Does this function across the relations between different

17 ibid.
cultures (and one might also include class), or does it serve to confirm their differences?

One of the tenets of the new museology is to identify and question the authorship of exhibitions and other museum statements, no longer assuming the museum as ultimate authority or as an exclusive realm of knowledge. The modern museum, the museum of Enlightenment ideology, hoped to transform attitudes and behaviour. Through educational efforts, whole populations might become more middle-class, more 'civilised'. Yet, as Michel de Certeau has noted, 'even the analysis of the repression exercised by the mechanisms of this system of disciplinary enclosure continues to assume that the public is passive, "informed", processed, marked, and has no historical role.' In this sense, the new museum, despite its intentions, remains overlaid with the productivist logic of consumption, which, for de Certeau, contains the belief that creativity or initiative only takes place in what he calls 'technical laboratories' (the preserve of the specialist). Is the new entrepreneurial museum a site for 'productivist logic', in spite of the move towards social inclusiveness? De Certeau argued that:

> the efficiency of production implies the inertia of consumption. It produces the ideology of consumption-as-a-receptacle. The result of class ideology and technical blindness, this legend is necessary for the system that distinguishes and privileges authors, educators, revolutionaries, in a word, "producers", in contrast with those who do not produce.

The new museology purports to challenge the mystique of specialist knowledge, yet in practice the contemporary assertion of professionalism in

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museum work, different to the eighteenth century dedicated amateur, operates
to invert this challenge. As de Certeau continues, “by challenging
“consumption” as it is conceived and (of course) confirmed by these
“authorial” enterprises, we may be able to discover creative activity where it
has been denied that any exists, and to relativise the exorbitant claim that a
certain kind of production (real enough, but not the only kind) can set out to
produce history by “informing” the whole of a country.” So theoretically we
might assume that it is possible to challenge the consumption confirmed by
‘authorial’ activity, but is this really being attempted in our museums? It is not
enough to name the curator or writer on a wall label or museum text.
Obviously the museum worker speaks and acts under the aegis of a range of
policies and as part of a larger set of practices, their assumptions often
unarticulated.

Advocates for an active socially oriented exchange with communities in the
museum have participated in museum staff discussions in Australia for some
time. For example, Elaine Heumann Gurian, one of the leading American
museologists, a visitor to Australia over many years, was a major consultant to
the National Museum of Australia. She encouraged museum staff to share
authority, to recognise that the museum is not the only authority, and noted that
visitors wish the museum to be impartial (which is not the same, she said as
‘objective’ – a term often used in the past, she said, as a de-personalised
‘other’). Certainly, as discussed in chapter two, the NMA has made efforts to
share authority and facilitate open debate, though the question must be asked as
to how successful this has been.

21 ibid.
22 ibid.
23 See for example Heumann Gurian, Elaine, 2001, “What is the Object of this Exercise: A
meandering Exploration of the Many meanings of Objects in Museums” in Humanities Research,
24 Gurian, Elaine Heumann, 2003, ‘Redefining Museums in the 21st Century: critique and
discussion’ in Contest and Contemporary Society Symposium, University of Sydney, 28
Australia has been a leader in the field in terms of its willingness to experiment with new ways of working in museums. New developments have included Questacon, the National Science and Technology Centre (opened in 1988), the Museum of Sydney (opened in 1995), and the new Museum of Melbourne (re-opened in a new building in 2000). Many other museums have tried to adopt some of the precepts of the new museology (to varying degrees). In 2002 Museums Australia adopted a new definition of a museum to suitably represent the sector in Australia. It declared that:

A museum helps people understand the world by using objects and ideas to interpret the past and present and explore the future. A museum preserves and researches collections, and makes objects and information accessible in actual and virtual environments. Museums are established in the public interest as permanent, not-for-profit organizations that contribute long-term value to communities.

The notion of ‘long-term value to communities’, accessibility and understanding confirm the Australian museum field’s commitment, however realised, to these new modes of operation.

These new community links produced changes in the governance of Australian museums. In the past, trustees of museums were chosen from the ranks of socially prominent citizens, but the new museology encouraged the creation of links with those who were not previously part of museum audiences. Increasingly museums and governments looked to the inclusion of new representatives on museum boards and councils. Business leaders were seen as

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keys to establishing good relationships with potential partners and sponsors. While artists and business leaders, for the most part all men, were included on Boards from very early on, in the period under discussion there was a move to include more community representatives, more women, Indigenous representatives and youth representatives. While museum directors still had to regularly explain their budgets and plans to local and state governments and Parliamentary and Senate Estimates Committees, their governing boards were also there to engage not only with the formal political system but also with the various community stakeholders to whom politics is sometimes beholden. The board was increasingly seen as a tool for lobbying for the interests of the museum and for fundraising, and to be at arms length from the day to day running of the museum. While museum governance merits a larger focus than possible in this thesis, it is important to note that the diverse expectations of entrepreneurial development and community engagement can create conflicts for museum boards over negotiating priorities.

Similarly, active collaboration between communities and museum workers can produce its own contradictions. Museum work in Australia has become increasingly professionalised over the last two to three decades and professional interests are not always amenable to equality in collaborative projects with non-specialists. Professional interests can sometimes thwart those of communities. Museum training courses, where once there were none and people had to travel overseas to study or undertake internships, have flourished. Courses have been instituted in universities and other tertiary institutions around the country, particularly in the area of curatorial practice and conservation, as well as general museum studies. Increasing numbers of graduates with degrees in art history, anthropology, history and the sciences have moved into museum work and enlarged the disciplinary specialties of museums. While the growth of the

27 See Appendix A for brief survey of membership of NMA and NGA Councils.
28 There are now courses in most major cities, including Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane, particularly at graduate level. Institutions that offer a range of courses include the
profession (which incorporates many different roles, from registrar and curator, to conservator, educator, and fundraiser) and its associated training is also outside the parameters of this thesis, it is notable that it is linked to the industry’s increasing dependence on temporary exhibitions as opposed to long-term or permanent collection displays. Demands from government for museums to be more entrepreneurial and to earn revenue have built a dependence on the large-scale temporary exhibition which has become known as the 'blockbuster'. These exhibitions, which potentially attract large numbers of visitors, require not only substantial research, but also, in order to negotiate major overseas loans and government indemnity, a substantial rise in the standards of museum practice. This ranged from rigid standards for environmental controls and security, to object handling, registration and conservation. The profession had to meet the demands of these new circumstances.

Professional associations, while some had existed for decades (the Regional Galleries Association of Victoria was formed in 1957, and Australian museums had, in the early twentieth century, been members of the British Museums Association), also began to flourish and become more active. They lobbied for the interests of their members, both for professional recognition in the workplace, and by supporting the development of internships and establishing professional development grants for travel and study. They also lobbied for the development of the museum industry as a whole. These organisations particularly helped to promote research and discussion about museology and broader cultural industry issues and provided major forums for debate and the presentation of new ideas through regular meetings and seminars, special interest

Australian National University, Curtin University of Technology, Deakin University, Macquarie University, the University of Sydney and the University of Canberra.


30 A peak body was CAMA, the Council of Australian Museums Associations, which represented a large number of history and science museum associations. The Art Museums Association was another peak body. These two organisations amalgamated in 1993 to become Museums Australia which is now the primary representative body for all museums in Australia.
groups and annual conferences. An increasingly reflexive industry responded to new pressures on it from governments and interest groups alike by engaging with international (especially British and US) debates on museology and brought these ideas to bear in an Australian context. Australian museum professionals engaged readily with much of the philosophy of the new museology, particularly in the context of Indigenous representation and rights, taking on board the critiques by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of the museum’s role in the colonial history of Australia.

New histories:

But what of earlier efforts? In the 1980s very few Australian museums attempted to radically redefine their missions in response to the new museology. So when the Pioneer Women’s Hut (PWH) in Tumbarumba, New South Wales, opened in 1985, it offered a then rare new approach to the use of history. A simple sign opposite the entry declared that:

> the policy of the museum is to show domestic objects relating to rural families, especially the women, and to research rural women’s lives. We give priority to the everyday over the quaint and to the representative over the unique. We don’t focus on special events or even “best work”, and we readily accept that not all farm women excelled at domestic crafts. Most had double lives, helping on the farm and running a home.

> “The Past” is often seen as belonging to “important” people, often famous and rich, often from cities, and often men, but it is through an understanding of the everyday lives of ordinary people that we will learn more about what it is to be Australian.

31 The annual conferences of Museums Australia and the various regional associations regularly publish their papers and have become a major focus of industry research and development. The Council of Australian Museums Associations, the Art Museums Association of Australia and now Museums Australia have all worked with other bodies such as the Australia Council, the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils and the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission to analyse cultural industry needs and trends and to further professional and community interests.
Enjoy the museum, it belongs to us all.\textsuperscript{32}

The Pioneer Women's Hut is one of the smallest museums in Australia, but its practices, however limited by financial and other constraints, articulate aspects of the new museology, and its Honorary Director, Wendy Hucker, had been cognisant of new debates about museology and new approaches to history when she moved from Sydney to Rosewood in southern NSW and became involved in the PWH project.\textsuperscript{33}

Walking inside, the visitor is immediately struck by the museum's modesty and its relaxed feel. Its small spaces, containing displays of domestic objects, are nearly all visible from the front door, and having crossed the threshold, the visitor is already within the exhibition space. Objects (admittedly mostly


\textsuperscript{33} 2003, interview with Wendy Hucker, 12 March. Wendy Hucker had also regularly participated in museums conferences, for example, she gave a paper entitled 'Small and large museums: two distinct species which have much to gain from more interaction', at the 1990 CAMA conference in the Regional Museums Specialist Session, published in 1991. See McMichael, Donald F. (ed.), 1991, \textit{Australian Museums – Collecting and Presenting Australia}, Proceedings of the Council of Australian Museum Associations Conference, Canberra, 21 – 24 November 1990, Melbourne, CAMA.
common items rather than unique specimens) are not found in glass cases or museum cabinets but sit on tables (where you may touch them), in old farmhouse cupboards (that you may open), or hang on walls, often as if they are still part of a functioning home (like an apron hanging on a hook). Instantly one is aware that this is a special place.

It is not, however, a family home, now conserved, nor is it a recreation of one. Built by a team of local farmers using parts of recycled prison huts (from a nearby prison farm, the Mannus Correctional Centre), it is a simple building of domestic scale with one large room and one smaller one. The large room, which you enter first, has been divided by recycled wooden partitions which allow a separation into thematic displays. These themes change regularly, but all relate to rural women's domestic lives and their role as 'another pair of hands' on the farm. In late 2003 the themes included Mondays, Never done, Waste not, want not, Coping with flies and Time for fancy work.

The smaller room contains the National Quilt Register and is an open storage space and work room. Visitors are welcome (and invited) to don a pair of white gloves and open boxes, look at collection items not currently on display or inspect some of the quilts in the PWH collection. The National Quilt Register, an initiative of the PWH, is primarily a research tool, with its own website, and was the PWH's contribution to the Centenary of Federation celebrations in 2001. It gathers and records information from around Australia.
on quilts from the early nineteenth century to around 1965 (there are already over 1,000 registered). The cut-off year of 1965 was chosen because of the recent revival of quilt making. A collaboration with various women’s groups, including regional museums and embroidery groups, it gathers information on the stories of the various quilts, their makers and families, along with images, and records the quilts where the stories have been lost. Importantly, the quilts remain with their owners, not a practice that one might envisage in many other museums, but their stories are given life as part of an, until now, untold history.3 4

A free museum, the PWH is run by volunteers and receives no ongoing funding from government. The collection, begun in 1985, has been established and expanded almost exclusively through donations. The PWH declares, in a pamphlet, that ‘it is our policy to collect domestic objects relating to rural families, especially the women, and by gathering the stories put these objects in the context of their lives.’ This articulates the new museology’s desire to relate to the everyday and the ordinary. Continuing, the pamphlet acknowledges that rural women are not a single entity, described by any one characteristic, saying ‘we recognise the great diversity of women’s lives and, from the first days of settlement, the very different ethnic origins that give us our Australian identity as women.’ In a important recognition of the previous owners, dispossessed from their land, the PWH acknowledged ‘the major contribution of Aboriginal women, especially in understanding the environment, and remind our visitors that they were our first needlewomen’.3 5 Additionally, Honorary Director Wendy Hucker has declared that

34 As the declaration on the website itself records, ‘old quilts of all types have always been about memories and women’s hidden, often unspoken, language. They carry stories about our history and about needlework and provide a rich insight into women’s lives. In the National Quilt Register women tell their own stories, some for the first time, about love, despair, managing, surviving, adversity, friendship, endurance. The quilts stay where they are and the stories are shared.’ (Thoroughgood, Hucker, n.d.).
In researching rural women’s lives it is the letters, the diaries (rare) and the photographs (especially the ordinary snapshots) that give the real insights. We will take copies and return the originals...we don’t want rural Australian families to be represented mainly by the durable, the precious or the ineffective so we need to collect in more difficult areas. We need to represent the everyday lives of ordinary women’ (Hucker, n.d., author’s emphasis).36

It is this humble ambition of the Pioneer Women’s Hut that is most striking and which reflects the humility of the pioneer women it celebrates, women who just did what they had to do and rarely complained. The emphasis on the primacy of the ‘everyday’ and the ‘ordinary’ is a potent articulation of the new museology. The PWH’s focus on rural women is a deliberate attempt to redress the balance of conventional pioneer history, so frequently the story of male struggle and achievement. The PWH does not attempt a taxonomic coverage of the lives of rural women – its collections and displays reveal a slice of history rather than a comprehensive survey – and it does not place these slices within a detailed historical framework. Similarly, the emphasis is no longer on preservation, but on interpretation and experience. Less a scholarly analysis of types and systems, it is more interested in the experience of the visitor and making a direct connection to the histories and experiences of their own that they bring with them to the Hut. This is about recognizing oneself in the museum, rather than finding the exotic and unusual. Through the direct perception of objects, by touching and handling them, or experiencing them in a space similar in scale and informality to their own domestic environment, the visitor is encouraged to use their own experiences to respond to and interpret the objects. Community participation is both part of the construction of the museum, its displays and

collection, and the interpretation of the museum through its spatial and psychic environment, labels, guides and visitors.  

Of course, the PWH’s rural isolation is what enables it to exist in its present form. It is independent, and so answers to no great bureaucracy, its small size allows it to institute change fairly easily and it isn’t subject to the public scrutiny of large national institutions. It has very small visitor numbers and thus comparatively low wear and tear on the capacities of the institution and its collection. It is unlikely that a larger museum could operate in the same way, and in fact, the PWH relies on the occasional assistance of larger institutions such as the Powerhouse in Sydney with tasks such as conservation.

Many local, volunteer-run museums have existed around Australia for decades yet few have such a clear sense of their mission and how to achieve it. The development of social history, or ‘history from below’, was the inspiration for this museum. In the 1970s and 1980s there was an enormous increase in historical societies in Australia, and similarly, increasingly large numbers of ordinary citizens began to pursue family histories and genealogies. The Migration Museum in Adelaide was established in 1986 (after the PWH), described by Bennett, Bulbeck and Finnane as ‘an archetypal institutional product of the themes of social history since the 1960s’ and ‘its political context and rationale was the 1970s policy development on multiculturalism’. The influence of multiculturalism on museums in this period saw not just the establishment of museums dedicated to it, but also the development of government policies for cultural diversity in museums and new focuses in exhibitions and collection development.

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40 For example: Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, 1991, A Plan for Cultural Heritage Institutions to reflect Australia’s Cultural Diversity, Canberra, AGPS. See also Birtley, Margaret and McQueen, Patricia (eds.), 1989, New Responsibilities
Along with a permanent collection and a regular exhibition program, the Migration Museum runs an education program that focuses on promoting cultural and ethnic tolerance and encourages the participation of various ethnic communities in its activities, including in exhibition development. One of the most significant ways it does this is through its Community Access Gallery, The Forum, which is a space for community groups to mount their own exhibitions and tell their own stories. Recent exhibitions here have included Tree of Life in 1999, the story of South Australia’s Jewish community, and Faith, Hope and Goodwill, by the Greek Women’s Auxiliary of the Sts Constantine and Helen Church Tabitha in 2002, showing the work of the women’s auxiliary in supporting the church and the wider community. One of the most prominent recent exhibitions has been 2001’s Survivors of Torture and Trauma, which included the experiences of refugees and information on the processes that refugees go through to get to Australia, an issue that has become highly contentious in Australia since the Howard Government’s policy of detention for what they called ‘illegal immigrants’.41 Melbourne also opened its own Immigration Museum in 1998. Its permanent exhibitions document the themes of Leavings, Settling, Journeys and Getting In (on the history of immigration policies in Australia). Like the Adelaide museum, it has a community gallery in which communities can document and explore their own migration experiences.

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In 1988, Sydney's old Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences reopened in the refurbished Ultimo powerhouse, renaming itself after the building. The Powerhouse Museum, with 20,000 square metres of exhibition space, incorporated social history along with a range of science, technology, decorative arts, music and transport, though Director Dr Kevin Fewster called it a 'museum of design'. It was one of the first museums in Australia to include new technologies, with 250 interactive displays, touch screens and, latterly, virtual reality 3D theatres. Its multidisciplinary collection encouraged new ways of using social history to link diverse subjects and collections.

Major state museums, such as the Melbourne Museum, also began to incorporate social history into their exhibition and interpretative practices from the early 1990s. Since then, the field has expanded to include adventurous institutions such as the Museum of Sydney and new interpretations of existing sites such as The Barracks in Sydney's Macquarie Street.

In 2000 the Melbourne Museum opened a new building in Carlton Gardens which included science and history. Here it incorporated social history in its Australia Gallery, for example, presenting the lives of ordinary people who lived in Melbourne's inner city, in Little Lonsdale Street, in the late nineteenth century. Similarly, Indigenous culture and experience in Victoria was presented in the Bunjilaka Gallery, including Indigenous voices and contemporary perspectives on the ongoing divide between Indigenous knowledge and law and the domination of white society. Even the inclusion of contemporary Indigenous history and culture is a shift from older museum representations which frequently isolated Indigenous material in a narrative of evolutionary progression.

43 Melbourne Museum is part of a larger organisation, Museum Victoria (the State Museum of Victoria), which is the umbrella for a range of institutions, including the Immigration Museum, Scienceworks and Melbourne Planetarium.
44 Angela Philp, field notes, 2004.
One of the most radical experiments in new museology is the Museum of Sydney. Opened in 1995, it was built on the 1788 site of the colony's first Government House. The subject of diverse opinions in the museum community, it has been variously described as veering 'from bricolage to pastiche, and from muddle back to traditional and very familiar narratives of colonialism...[a] big budget, high technology, intellectualized museum'\(^4\) to 'bold and ambitious...an imaginative museum, a conversation between the past and the present...a postmodern electronic museum whose “exhibits” are created using an invisible bedrock of new technologies'.\(^5\) The museum avoids large historical narratives, instead incorporating, at opening, about thirty-five stories around the themes of the environment, trade and authority (voiced electronically and using video imagery and holograms as well as objects) from ghosts, convicts, Indigenous people, merchants and travellers – activated by the movement of the visitor in the space (with infra-red technology). The museum literally presents history as a series of fragments, exposing the fiction of seamless narratives. Work by digital artists sits side-by-side with curatorial input, and exhibition areas cover three floors with a central two-storey video spine indicating the pre-contact bush of Sydney – a reminder of Indigenous dispossession. It can be a confusing experience for those not aware of the intellectual complexities it is gesturing to, yet there are elements that evoke personal experience and memory, and discoveries to be made in open storage cabinets that allow visitors to select and view at will.\(^7\)

Museums of social history seek new ways to make history – its stories and practices – more accessible to the public. One of the ways they do this is by encouraging community participation in the museum. This can be through making exhibition spaces available for community-developed exhibitions


(allowing other voices into the museum), as seen for example in Adelaide’s Migration Museum, or by developing exhibitions with various community groups or individuals involved in the actual planning and development of the project. The 1992 Museum of Victoria exhibition *Between Two Worlds: Jews, Italians and Carlton* was an exemplary model of this practice, where the communities of Carlton, past and present, participated in the whole exhibition process, including contributing to joint decisions about content and interpretation (often with compromise on both sides\(^4\)). Similarly, community input is frequently sought in relation to collection development and the assessment of and research into objects once acquired. Underlying this is the assumption that the practice of history, as in the Pioneer Women’s Hut, is not exclusively the preserve of professionals, nor is it any longer concerned with only the famous or distinguished. The interpretive role of history in the museum has become as important as the presentation of factual data. The NMA, for instance, in its *Gallery of First Australians*, incorporated the oral testimony of Indigenous people, and the interpretive works of contemporary visual artists like Fiona Foley, to heighten the impact of stories about massacres. It also expressed a commitment to work in partnership with communities where appropriate, in exhibition development, though the prescriptions generated by the 2002 Review (which will be discussed in chapter six) may yet divert the museum from this.\(^5\)

The broadening of the practice of history is accompanied by a more inclusive and diverse range of subjects and themes in the museum and more critical approaches to them. Nor is the social history museum content to include

\(^{47}\) Angela Philp, field notes, 2002.


\(^{49}\) In 2002 the Museum affirmed its commitment to developing ‘strong links with other museums, educational and research institutions, their cultural agencies and community groups’ and to ‘involve communities in the interpretation, documentation and representation of their tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage, respond to community needs in the preservation and representation of their cultural aspirations and heritage’ and equally, to ‘rigorously apply its commitment to…active recruitment and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from non-English speaking backgrounds’, in *Values, Ethics and Guidelines for Behaviour*, NMA website, www.nma.gov.au/aboutus/ethics.htm [Accessed: 21.4.02].
ordinary people as subjects alone — they are desired as audiences and participants. The comfortable and domestic feel of the PWH, for example, instantly puts visitors at ease — they do not need to adapt their responses to an imposing institutional environment. This brings to light another issue for museums, as ‘cultural capital’ — the educational and cultural training possessed by those who are the most frequent museum visitors — is rarely possessed by those who have previously been excluded from the museum.\(^{50}\) The new museology attempts to confront this issue, but any effort to expand audiences to include those previously excluded also runs the risk of distancing those who were the cultural elites in the earlier form of the museum. As will be seen in chapter seven, government requirements for increased entrepreneurial activity in museums and to prove their ‘public good’ benefits through primarily statistical means (visitor numbers), leave the museum to negotiate often conflicting interests.

Equally, controversial issues, rather than being avoided, are now potential subjects for exhibition, with the possibility of several aspects or sides of an issue opening up interpretation rather than closing it off with an authoritative museum voice. The use of oral testimony, once (and sometimes still) regarded as problematically unreliable compared to the written archive,\(^{51}\) now has a new place, recording the stories people have about objects or events. Equally, written sources are now the subject of critical interrogation, while the role of memory is increasingly linked to both the idea of witnessing and the notion of history as being contingent or provisional in nature.\(^{52}\) In other words, the practice of history is not unambiguous nor is it infallible. What usually survives, or surfaces, in the written record can be what is the officially sanctioned perspective of the

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\(^{50}\) See Bourdieu, Pierre, 1979, op. cit.

time. The voice of the ‘other’ can often only be retrieved through the practice of oral history. The new social history museum recognises this and seeks to redress the ‘balance’. As Bennett, Bulbeck and Finnane reflected in their report *Accessing the Past*, ‘the orientation of the museum to the phenomena of everyday life...owes a great deal to the modern emphasis on history as a process of understanding diversity, conflict and change, particularly as they are evident in the experience of ordinary people’. It is in this context that it became possible to celebrate the lives of rural women, to look at the ordinary and the everyday and for the PWH to commemorate some of the quieter struggles of Australian life.

Access to the work of the museum can be facilitated through education and public programs. However, these are no longer in the form of training to shape visitors as suitable receptacles for authoritative knowledge. When the National Museum opened in 2001 it introduced a raft of educational and public program initiatives, formal and informal, which were aimed at targeting a broad spectrum of visitors and catering for a wide range of interests and backgrounds. Australian cultural policy researcher Robin Trotter has noted that, ‘as museums reinvent themselves, they implicitly and complicidy reinvent their audiences’. The NMA has, in a sense, reinvented its audiences. By linking many visitor activities directly with current debates, including those generated by the Museum’s own exhibitions, it has tried to encourage an active engagement with the production and reception of history. For example, the Museum instituted a series of public forums, each usually lasting from one to three days and fairly formally organized (along the lines of academic conferences and seminars), that have addressed significant themes of exhibitions or major contemporary issues in

historiography. These have included *Museums: Panacea or Provocateur?*, *Australians in Antarctica*, *Native Title* and *Cultural Frontiers in Question: Nation, Religion, Refugees*.56

One of the forums focused on a major debate surrounding the museum – *Frontier Conflict*, held in December 2001, was a response to the questions being raised by critics of the Museum. Historian and polemicist Keith Windschuttle, for example, had disputed the evidence for armed conflict between European settlers and Aboriginal people, as presented in the First Australians exhibition. The two-day forum invited Windschuttle and a number of anthropologists and historians of Indigenous history in Australia to debate the nature of evidence, memory and the construction of history.57 Here the Museum took on the role of fostering the debate that began in the public sphere, specifically by inviting its critics and supporters to address the issues in an environment that would allow all the historical disputes and facts to be aired. This provided a fuller picture for anyone interested in understanding the whole debate. Similarly, for those unable to attend the forum, and in addition to the publication of its papers, the Museum provided material on its website outlining the disputes about the First Australians Gallery, in particular, the virtual reality interactive on Bells Falls Gorge which described a massacre known primarily through oral history.58 The site identifies each individual item in the display, includes comments from various observers, showing different responses to the material, and then directs the visitor to a page called ‘Key criteria for judging a museum display’ which provides general questions for the viewer to ask themselves about the material (i.e. leaving the final judgement to the individual).59


57 Historians included Bain Attwood, Stephen Foster, Graeme Davison, Ann Curthoys and Henry Reynolds. John Mulvaney, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the Australian National University was also a major contributor. The forum resulted in a book of essays, *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, published by the National Museum in 2003.


59 ibid.
In the same spirit, in 2001 the NMA initiated a festival called *Tracking Kultja*, in conjunction with other national institutions (ScreenSound, the National Gallery of Australia and the National Library of Australia). A celebration of Indigenous culture, it aimed to also provide a cross-cultural experience, by exchanges of knowledge and teaching. Indigenous people ran workshops on weaving, tool-making, dancing, languages and culture, and in the spirit of exchange, staff from the national cultural institutions held workshops for Indigenous people on conservation and accessing collections. The festival included performances, such as one telling the Anangu story of ancestral being ‘Kungkarangkalpa’ and a Torres Strait canoe dance to celebrate the Saibai canoe installed in the *First Australians Gallery*. Three public forums explored the connections and perceptions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The NMA’s open storage facility in the *First Australians Gallery* was also an important focus in the festival, allowing Indigenous communities and individuals to inspect some of the collection material not on exhibition, especially that related to their own language and clan groups. This facility is available continually, though generally it is necessary to make an appointment to access it.

In an awareness of the history of appropriation of Indigenous material by museums, the NMA has a Repatriation Program that is responsible for the return of human remains and sacred objects to the Indigenous people with cultural rights to those materials. The NMA did not deliberately collect such material but holds these items because they were part of the collections transferred from the Australian Institute of Anatomy in 1984. In addition, the Museum assists in coordinating the repatriation of material from selected institutions in the United Kingdom. This program is an important part of the Museum’s good faith with Indigenous communities, and a reversal of years of practice in older museums (in Australia, and internationally) that acquired such
material with little or no consideration of the rights, sensitivities or interests of
the Indigenous owners.60

The NMA established a familiar program of evening lectures and informal talks,
as well as a vast array of activities for families, children and school groups. 
Talkback classroom, as noted earlier in chapter two, engages middle and senior secondary students in discussion with key public figures and offers an important mode of social inquiry for young people, while the Broadcast Studio enables national and international outreach which expands the capacity for public debate. As the Museum itself describes the Studio, 'it links us, as a place of social and political debate, to all Australians from regional and city communities, to remote areas of Indigenous Australia.'61 Storytelling, riddles, information kiosks and interactive kiosks are located throughout the exhibition spaces, along with Story Place, for children, where stories are told with puppets and videos. Curriculum-based programs for visiting (and remote, via the website) school groups form the basis of formal education programs, and these are enhanced with events such as 2001’s Race Around the Museum in which students were armed with digital cameras to record their museum experiences and produce posters, and museum performances such as by the wandering green aliens, ‘Clarrie’ and ‘Eunice’, who were linked to the temporary exhibition To Mars and Beyond: Search for the Origins of Life in 2001 — a device to directly engage children. All these activities are part of a policy to provide lifelong learning, to use education and learning to engage with communities, to recognize and cater for a wide range of learning styles and to promote what the museum calls ‘inquiry learning’ which encourages visitors to use the material offered by the Museum to

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60 A thorough history and analysis of earlier museum practices with regard to Indigenous material may be found in Griffiths, Tom, 1996, op. cit.
reach their own conclusions. The NMA has made a concerted effort to create innovative programs that are designed to attract and motivate diverse visitors.

Back in the early 1980s the National Gallery was riding a wave of celebration of national culture. As a modern institution, it remained committed to the development and preservation of its collections as its primary focus, albeit accompanied by a strong will to educate its visitors, a focus of the modern museum since at least the early twentieth century. In the Gallery's first Annual Report after opening to the public, James Mollison noted the popularity of the Australian art collection, and described the inaugural display as tracing 'a full, systematic outline of the growth of Australian art from the 1770s to the 1970s.'

He stated that 'no such permanent display of Australian art has ever before been presented; nor have other countries attempted similar permanent displays of their own visual arts achievements.' As well as the reference to Australian art only beginning with white settlement, his comments imagined a passive public for this art, describing them as a 'largely tourist public drawn from the whole of Australia and relatively uninformed both about art in general and about the art of this country.' There is no suggestion here of partnership or exchange, but rather a sense of an empty vessel needing to be filled. This attitude wasn't unique to the National Gallery and was typical of many museums in Australia at the time.

Nevertheless the National Gallery pursued an active program of educational activities. From the outset, public events included weekday lunchtime and Sunday afternoon lectures in front of works of art in the gallery spaces, and Thursday evening slide lectures in the theatre. Twenty-six gallery guides, who had undertaken 12 months training with the Gallery's Education department, led

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64 ibid.
four daily public tours that were primarily introductions to the breadth of the
Gallery's collections. Thousands of students, from infants to tertiary level, were
booked in for specially tailored tours conducted by Education staff, who also
produced educational material, particularly in the form of brochures and slide
kits. Education staff were also involved in the development of loyalty programs,
aimed at maintaining a regular clientele. For the Members' Association
programs, they delivered members-only lectures and art appreciation courses,
holiday activities for Members' children (later extended to the general public),
kids adventure trails, and a program of films on art. In the first year, a Members'
program of four lectures was presented on *The Art of the Aborigines*, 'discussing
Aboriginal works of art within a fine art context'66 so, despite the apparent need
to distinguish its focus from ethnographic discussions of Aboriginal art, it was at
least acknowledging Indigenous art early on. Educational exhibitions were also
established early, some as simple as single display cases on *Materials of Art* (oil
paint, watercolours and gouache), and others more extensive like the popular
child-focused and child-scaled *Artzoo* and the subsequent *Eye Spy* series.67
Outreach programs included taking slide talks to the aged and residents of
nursing homes, encouraging them to visit the Gallery, while many staff also
visited pre-schools and community clubs and societies. This very personal
service was a great success and encouraged many to make their first visits to the
Gallery.68

One of the issues which concerned Gallery education in those early days was the
difference between formal and informal education. Formal education, capturing

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65 ibid. 77% of visitors at the time were from interstate or overseas.
67 *Artzoo*, curated by Alison French, was held in 1983/84. An exhibition on the theme of animals, it was designed to introduce children under 12 to the Gallery's collections and was displayed in a specially designed space at child scale. *Eye Spy: A Journey*, curated by Angela Philp in 1985/86, was an exhibition designed (and sized) for pre-school children incorporating snoopholes and unusual views of objects. Through art, it took children on a day's journey from the city into the country. It became an ongoing series over a period of a number of years and was very popular. *Australian National Gallery Annual Report 1985/86*, p. 12.
68 Interview with Ron Ramsay, Head Public Programs and Education, National Gallery of Australia, 12 September, 2002.
student populations and providing services to them, was comparatively easy. They were readily identifiable and easily targeted groups. Informal education was not, however, much different in character. Terence Measham\textsuperscript{69}, Senior Curator of Education (and it is significant that he was given equal status to senior exhibition and collections curators, in seniority and title), noted that ‘for many visitors to the ANG, learning is an individual experience not tied to formal education programmes. For this reason, the Education Department organizes informal gallery talks and discussions, particularly at lunch-times, to encourage visitors to develop confidence in their own lines of thought and to recognize the Gallery as a storehouse of images, ideas and values from all parts of the world.’\textsuperscript{70} While effective platforms for information, these were still somewhat semi-formal, requiring scheduling and group participation from the individual, and not actually self-directed.

The Gallery as ‘storehouse’, while also seen to contain ideas and values, still required a mediator who determined the paths that might be explored. These paths were very clearly those of conventional art history. Meaning and interpretation, while there could be differences of opinion, were firmly based on ideas of aesthetic style, artistic influences and avant-garde practices. Social context, ethnographic or historical information were significant only in relation to aesthetic decisions. This was confirmed by the curriculum for guide training which was essentially modelled on university art history courses\textsuperscript{71} and incorporated lectures on art historical movements, demonstrations of art techniques, slide tests, essays, and viva voce exams. Unlike Mollison’s comment, Terence Measham enjoined the guides never to assume their visitors were ignorant of art history, and to ensure that information was presented in an

\textsuperscript{69} Terence Measham was previously Head of Education at the Tate Gallery in London.
\textsuperscript{71} Guide training was based around a program of slide lectures on art history and aspects of the NGA collection, with essay requirements, slide tests and viva voce examination in front of works of art. Interview with Marjory Wilson, emeritus NGA guide, 22 July 2005.
entertaining manner\textsuperscript{73}, but in any case the focus was to be art historically accurate and to not wander far from conventional interpretations.\textsuperscript{73} It is notable that they were also told never to use anthropological or ethnographic information in talking about Aboriginal art.\textsuperscript{74}

Rather than shifts in the ways of producing exhibitions – collaborations beyond other art institutions were unknown, and voices other than those of the curator or the artist were unheard - the new art history was, in part, the means by which the Gallery responded to new museological ideas. In fact though, the new art history did not cause a revolution in the Gallery – exhibitions remained largely about art historical movements or individuals (such as \textit{Australian Printmaking 1773 – 1985, Two Great French Caricaturists – Daumier and Gavarni, L’Estampe Moderne} on late nineteenth century French prints, or the blockbuster \textit{The Great Impressionists}\textsuperscript{75}). However it did allow a greater range of material into the art historical canon and the possibility of exploring broad themes. Exhibitions now occasionally encompassed diverse territory with titles like \textit{The Artist as Social Critic, Mariano Fortuny} (a fashion designer), and \textit{The Tree and the Mountain: Natural Images in Indonesian Textiles}\textsuperscript{76}. Aboriginal art was actively collected from the 1983/84 financial year, with a portion of admission fees allocated to it, and was finally made a separate department the following year, no longer under the catch-all of \textit{Australian Aboriginal, Oceanic, African and Pre-Columbian American Art}.\textsuperscript{77}

At the same time (1984/85) the Asian Art and Textiles collecting policy was broadened to include not only Hindu and Buddhist art, particularly from India and Japan, but also art from the entire Asian continent. Purchases were made of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{72} Interview with Marjory Wilson, 22 July, 2005, one of the first group of guides to be trained by the Gallery in 1981/82.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{73} ibid.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{74} Interview with Alison French, 17 February, 2005.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{75} The exhibitions \textit{Australian Printmaking 1773 – 1985} and \textit{Two Great French Caricaturists – Daumier and Gavarni} were held in 1985/86; \textit{L’Estampe Moderne} ran from 1 June to 14 August 1983; and \textit{The Great Impressionists: Masterpieces from the Courtauld Collection} ran from 2 June to 5 August 1984.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{76} \textit{The artist as social critic} was held in 1985/86; \textit{Mariano Fortuny} in 1983/84; and \textit{The Tree and the Mountain: Natural Images in Indonesian Textiles} in 1986/87.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{77} See \textit{Australian National Gallery Annual Report 1984/85}, Canberra, ANG, p. 16.}
textiles not only from Indonesia, but also Afghanistan, the Philippines, the Maldives and Malaysia, and objects from Iran and Sri Lanka, and in 1989 the department's purchasing power was substantially increased. These new interests were eventually documented in the official acquisitions policy produced under Betty Churcher in 1994, who had become Director in 1989/90. Similarly, a new emphasis on 'public access' became policy in 1989/90, again under Betty Churcher.

Increasingly, during the 1980s, the needs of the visiting public were recognized and the introductory room brochures, which had been part of the Gallery since the beginning, were supplemented with extended explanatory labels and the introduction of hand-held audio-guides, particularly for major blockbuster exhibitions. These were hardly revolutionary changes. The art museum has such a strongly ritualised relationship to the isolated art object (and that is so intimately and irrevocably connected to its consumption in the art market) that it appears only possible to make changes at the edges, while the very 'framing' of the work of art, in the sense of its public exhibition and interpretation, must remain firmly within the context only of other art, and not that to which the art sometimes refers. While the National Museum today has art and historical displays inhabiting the same space and dealing with the same intellectual or historical issue, (though not always successfully), the National Gallery, for instance, exhibits the political statement that is the Aboriginal Memorial in a manner that isolates it from its historical moment and, in a sense, could be said to diminish its 'voice'. Can it be viewed any differently from the Papunya acrylics, the Calder mobile or Pollock's Blue Poles? This will be explored further in chapter four.

However, perhaps the best way to describe the difference between the potential of a social history approach (which can be applied in an art context) and a

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78 Betty Churcher was previously the Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.
traditional art history approach is to describe two more recent exhibitions – one in the NGA and one in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT).

**Different values:**

The Northern Territory has a strong contemporary and historical link with Indonesia and this relationship continues in MAGNT. For an exhibition of Indonesian textiles from their own collection (from a donation over nearly 500 items from Michael Abbott) called ‘Speaking with Cloth: Cerita Dalam Kain’ in 2003, curator James Bennett actually took components of the collection (to the conservator's horror), and photographs of it, over to Indonesia and interviewed people in the villages where these cloths originated, to uncover their lost stories. This was recaptured impressively in the exhibition itself, which was also visually stunning, where the people interviewed are shown in photographs on wall text accompanied by their own comments on the meanings and significance of the cloths, their uses and importance, and even their feelings about seeing these things in an Australian museum.79 Their comments are written in both Indonesian and English.

Most important of all, do not carelessly regard cloth made for ceremonies or considered sacred by its owners. Let textiles be placed in a museum for use there. That is no problem if it is to inform others. But just don't then treat it without respect.

*Wall text, Speaking with Cloth, MAGNT, 2003*

The textiles dated from the eighteenth century until recent times and included a wide variety of cloths used for ritual purposes, weddings and burials, and everyday wear. Stories of cultural loss and revival appeared in the stories

accompanying each cloth, as seen in the wall text statements. For example, one of these declares 'I am very sad to see sacred cloth sold in art shops. We must value the textiles that are like a prayer for those who use them. Instead we just see this cloth only used to get money. Soon, all these textiles will be gone in Bali. They will all be overseas...'80 — a poignant statement given that the exhibition (and collection) was, indeed, overseas.

I always look at who used the textiles. It seems to me the textiles with a high artistic value were always used at the time of birth and ceremonies for death. So a person born is welcomed with clothing as if to say “Greetings. You have arrived in this world full of problems.” Then at the moment a person dies he or she is wrapped in cloth as a sign of farewell to indicate “You have now left this world full of problems.”

*Wall text, Speaking with Cloth, MAGNT, 2003*

The exhibition very potently described the relationships of the textiles to their makers, users and owners, and was deeply affecting. MAGNT staff reported that visitors said the exhibition ‘sang’.81

In the same year, 2003, the National Gallery also held an exhibition of Indonesian (and Indian) textiles. It was called *Sari to Sarong: Five Hundred Years of Indian and Indonesian Textile Exchange*, and also included many textiles that were part of donations from Michael and Mary Abbott, who also donated the works in the MAGNT exhibition.

Writing about the exhibition, NGA curator Robyn Maxwell, stated that it explored the exchanges of textiles ‘in a series of related thematic displays beginning with an important symbol of trade, the popular, although often

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80 These are the words of a villager interviewed by Curator James Bennett about the Abbott Collection textiles and included in wall text in the exhibition *Speaking with cloth*. Angela Philp field notes, November 2003.
enigmatic ship motif. She described the exhibition content as 'Indonesian textiles featuring Hindu legends and Indian architectural forms, such as the mandala, together with the sumptuous gold cloth and costumes of the royal palaces that adopted many Indian forms of hierarchy and stagecraft, [and] reveal the enduring legacy of Indian cultural influences, especially in Sumatra, Java and Bali. A central gallery space is devoted entirely to historical Indian textiles collected in Indonesia, which demonstrate the diversity of sources that has inspired Indonesian textile craftswomen over the centuries.'

Although there are many references to the ritual uses of the textiles, these are described in the voice of the curator and read as part of an authoritative history. For example, Maxwell stated, after noting the funeral rituals and rites of life in which the textiles are used, that 'it is this veneration of textiles, especially the mysterious heirloom treasures which cannot be replaced, that explains the enormous care taken and the great skills of textile preservation developed by many peoples of Indonesia who still follow the ways of their ancestors.' While the approach was perfectly valid, it was primarily based on technical and stylistic exchanges and largely failed to communicate the spiritual power of the textiles. The difference for the public visitor is profound. In the NGA the textiles were separated from their place in their culture and the primary means of appreciation was aesthetic. Yet the aesthetics of these textiles are embedded in their associated rituals and meanings. Hearing the voice of the original owners of the cloths, understanding the loss of their culture which the new international trade in these textiles is producing, in which the museum is complicit, and which is unacknowledged in the NGA exhibition, adds a level of understanding otherwise unobtainable by the museum-going public.

81 2003, interview with Anna Malgorzewicz, Director, MAGNT, 9 November.
83 ibid.
84 ibid.
Knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is no longer seen as simply the objective statement of indisputable factual information, but as containing implicit world views that are culturally specific. The historical archive itself is the subject of much debate, as will be seen in chapter six, in discussion of the 'history wars' attending the reception of Indigenous history in the National Museum of Australia.

**Public discourse and political authority:**

The new museology, seeking to place the museum squarely in the context of social space and responsibility, is continually confronted with conflicting interests, both from divergently-identified communities and interests within the regional or national scene and from the exigencies of changing governments and changing government policies. In seeking the independence required to enter this broader social realm, the museum has inadvertently (or knowingly) also engaged in a broader political struggle. Politically, the rhetoric of the new museology has seemed to suggest similar interests to those of western governments, such as in Australia, who pay at least lip service to popular calls for openness and transparency. That is, an over-arching belief in the 'public good' and the needs of a civil society, suggests a form of consensus about what those needs might be, this consensus to be achieved through rational public debate. Habermas argues for this to take place in what he calls the 'life world' (the everyday world of human activity and sociability) – a place, Habermas says, that provides a shared realm in which to reach common understanding through 'communicative action'.

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85 Angela Philp, field notes, 2003.

86 The effects of globalisation, with a strongly interconnected international economic system, have included a de-regulation of markets and a withdrawal of direct intervention by the state from various sectors of civil society. This has resulted in both porous national boundaries (interconnectedness) and, through the rapid circulation of information, the possibility of a global culture, yet at the same time, the rhetoric of the local and national have intensified. The museum has to negotiate the tension between these spaces. See McGuigan, Jim, 1996, *Culture and the Public Sphere*, London and New York, Routledge.

attempts to be significant social sites in which this debate might take place—to be part of this life world.

Nevertheless, on a practical level, government in Australia is hierarchical, in the sense that decisions are made in the context of processes which incorporate government departments, research papers, committees, in increasingly complex layers. Government-run institutions which seek to operate outside this process, or are seen to have expressed opinions or comments that reflect on the issues that the process is apparently ‘managing’, are frequently seen to be out of control, interventionist and needing to be reined in (as will be demonstrated in the case of the NMA in chapter four). Herein lies the problem for museums. The new museology, for government-run institutions, places them at the nexus of general political discourse in society and governmental authority. Their ‘independence’, even for Statutory Authorities such as the National Gallery, is often easily withdrawn (MAGNT’s statutory status was withdrawn in 1997 after a series of managerial disputes and it is difficult to find a path between their responsibilities to both government and their broader constituencies. Museums have become more popular in Australia and world-wide, large numbers of new museums have been built in the last twenty to thirty years in Australia and elsewhere, and they have increasingly come to matter to more and more people. As standard-bearers for national and regional cultures they are mattering more to governments as well. It seems unlikely that government interest and interference in them will decrease any time soon.

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88 Interview with Anna Malgorzewicz, Director, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 9 November 2003.
89 16 million people visit 1,700 museums in Australia every year. An assessment of the transformation in Australian museums and the increase in their audiences over recent years can be found in Casey, Dawn and Wehner, Kirsten, 2002, ‘Centenary Article – Accounting for Audiences in Australian Museums’, Year Book Australia, Culture and Recreation, Australian Bureau of Statistics, at
Conclusion

The hope expressed in the new museology is for the museum to be part of a public sphere in which free and open debate can take place. It resists the passive consumption of culture in which museum programs are manipulated by publicity machines, are branded as commercial products, and are focussed on the easily consumed or formulaic experience by the need for entrepreneurial activity. The production of culture in this milieu becomes an act of marketing and mitigates against attempts to open the museum up to debate, to become part of the public sphere. The new museology challenges the authority of the museum\textsuperscript{90} and has encouraged a turn from being object-centred to being audience-centred. It accepts the diversity of knowledge and of learning styles, and asserts a new priority for the everyday and for those previously hidden from history. New definitions of museums have advocated active social roles for museums, acknowledging the power relations that the museum reproduces, and, by admitting new voices into the museum, attempts to give them agency within it.

Australian museums have been willing to engage these new ideas and many interpretations of the new museology can be found in new or revitalised institutions across Australia. The National Gallery and the National Museum have both adopted the rhetoric of the new museology, but in practice there are significant differences between the institutions' methodology, particularly evident in the different values with which each opened to the public.

The lifeworld, Habermas's location of the public sphere, and the system world, collide in large government-controlled museums and make realisation of the full

potential of the new museology impossible.\textsuperscript{91} The public sphere, for Habermas, is a place for communicative action, for debate, and ultimately \textit{a utopian consensus} (for Habermas then, plural positions required negotiation and compromise, rather than acceptance of difference). Yet it could also now be said to be the place of the political and administrative power machinery within the state. This 'system' world, the site of the capitalist economy and the bureaucracy of modern society, has one strategic goal - to maximise profit and create an effective administration. The 'lifeworld', which for Habermas is the place for social practice and cultural struggle, is the place of which the new museum aspires to be part.

Changes in museums in Australia over the last twenty years have increasingly opened them up to a broader and more diverse range of communities and to new discourses. Sometimes this has resulted in government pressure to restrict their public statements or communications (through collections and exhibitions) or even actual government interference in their operations. More frequently, it results in an inability of government to accept or acknowledge that museums, if they are to improve or maintain their status as impartial institutions, need to be seen to have some measure of independence from government. Thus, the rhetoric of the new museology becomes very difficult to negotiate in practice, as will be seen in later chapters on the National Gallery of Australia and the National Museum of Australia.

\textsuperscript{91} Habermas, 1984 and 1987, \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action}, Vols. 1 and 2.
Carpe diem: the relocation of Indigeneity in the museum

For a long time Aboriginal history in Australia was an impossibility. Aborigines were allowed to have myths, for myth is one of the markers of the primitive, but they had no history. True knowledge of the past was knowledge of Australia reserved for white Australians. Now this is changing.


Attitudes to Indigenous cultures and histories have been among the most significant markers of a huge cultural shift in Australian museums in the years since the opening of the National Gallery in 1982. This was also the time when Australia appeared to come to terms with its post-war multicultural character. Since the 1970s Government policies to promote multiculturalism and Aboriginal health, welfare and self-determination, had produced changes in museum collecting and exhibiting practices and
policies. While multiculturalism raises many relevant issues, I will focus on the Indigenous experience because it has had a particularly powerful impact on postcolonial constructions of Australian identity and continues to redefine our history and our culture in museums across Australia.

Australian responses to emerging internationalist and globalising trends included an ongoing search for a unique Australian identity. As mentioned earlier, in the 1970s this included a celebration of Australian vernacular characters and colonial history in film and television — *The Man From Snowy River*, *The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are but a few examples. These film images however did not find a parallel in the elite arts of painting and sculpture, nor in conceptualism and performance art. Yet Australian visual arts had long been addressing the nature of the land and its character, if not its people, while at the same time attending to the international trends exemplified in the New York art scene, and critiquing the appropriation of these forms by Australian artists. Debates about provincialism were circulating in the Australian art world at the same time as critiques of social and political issues and recognition of injustices were also becoming subjects of public debate. Australia's own history was gradually being re-examined in the light of these critiques. A new interest in Indigenous art and culture attested to an Australia that was ancient and could contribute to a new national imaginary — an identification with 'the

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1 See the 1993 Museums Australia policy intended to guide Australian museums in framing their own policies for dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultural heritage, *Previous Possessions. New Obligations*, Melbourne, Museums Australia.

2 Refer to my comments on multiculturalism and the development of museums such as the Migration Museum in Adelaide and the Immigration Museum in Melbourne in chapter three.

3 These films exemplified what were 'typical' Australian characters, such as the laconic ocker in *The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie* (1972, directed by Bruce Beresford), stoic and tough manhood in *The Man From Snowy River* (1982, directed by George Miller) and inspired by Banjo Patterson's poem of the same name, and the languid evocative atmosphere of colonial schoolgirls the bush in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975, directed by Peter Weir).


5 For example, the Aboriginal rights movement was gathering momentum in the 1970s in Australia, and the injustices of Aboriginal history had been recorded by historians such as Henry Reynolds. See Reynolds, Henry (ed.), and with an introduction by) 1972, *Aborigines and Settlers: The Australian Experience 1788 – 1939*, Melbourne, Cassell Australia.
Aboriginal' as proof of Australia's all-inclusive, yet autonomous identity — enabling an 'authentic' and no longer derivative Australian culture.

My two major case studies, the National Museum and the National Gallery, have both had significant roles in the process of revaluing Indigenous art and culture. In these museums, I argue, selective readings of Aboriginal art, history and material culture have been relocated and redefined to create a new Australian identity. These two particular institutions, as well as museums in general, have been symbolic sites of public debate on both the moral and ethical issues of Indigenous experience in this country and the commodification of Indigenous art in the market place.

Claiming Aboriginal Art

Up to the 1960s Aboriginal material culture was almost the exclusive preserve of museums of natural history and it was believed in the art world, particularly by art historians, critics and curators, that Aboriginal people did not have a tradition of art, only a decorative tradition. Similarly, anthropologists working in the museum had tended to reject the term 'art' because, as anthropologist Howard Morphy has suggested, the term was believed to impose a western categorisation on Aboriginal culture, one that deprived it of a fuller understanding and interpretation. So it is perhaps surprising that the National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry, in their Draft Report of 1965, which included more detailed and revealing comment than the slimmer final report, declared that ‘Aboriginal people are part of the nation and their traditional art, in any case so much more distinctive and redolent of the physical environment than that of the new-comers, should be in a National Gallery.'

In the context of assimilation policies designed to integrate Aboriginal people into white society and culture it is perhaps not surprising that the

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Report declared that 'it goes without saying that the art of latter day aborigines has a right to be seen as indistinguishable from that of the rest of the population.' The Report qualified this inclusiveness however by adding that

aboriginal art is the material of anthropological, archaeological, and ethnic studies and that collections have been formed and may be appropriately displayed for some of these purposes elsewhere in Canberra. The treatment of it given by the Gallery therefore may be less extensive and more selective than would otherwise be necessary.

The reference ‘elsewhere in Canberra’ was to the existing National Ethnographic Collection, then stored in the Institute of Anatomy, and the possibility of a future National Museum – by implication the responsibilities of the National Gallery in relation to Aboriginal art would remain subsidiary to these primary collectors.

This, perhaps hesitant, recognition clearly came from a sense of the importance of Indigenous cultures for Australia (and this was the year before the 1967 referendum), although the equivocation suggests it was still difficult to see Aboriginal art as being the cultural equivalent of western forms of art. Indeed, the Committee expected that museums of Aboriginal and archaeological materials, along with industrial design, a technological museum, and professional art training services (that is, an art school), would have provision made for them in the further development of Canberra, and thus the National Gallery should not seek to duplicate these. So why was Aboriginal art suddenly singled out for special consideration?

A few state galleries had held a handful of exhibitions of Aboriginal art from the late 1950s. Collecting by art museums up until the mid 1950s was limited.

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8 ibid.
9 ibid.
10 The 1967 referendum, though celebrated as giving Aboriginal people recognition as citizens (they actually had the Commonwealth vote in 1962, except in Queensland) actually just allowed the government to make any laws necessary for the welfare of Aboriginal people, and allowed them to be counted in the census. Nevertheless, it was an important recognition of the rights and needs of Aboriginal people.
Though the Art Gallery of South Australia had purchased one Aboriginal bark in 1939 (reportedly the first such purchase by an Australian state gallery), the major acquisitions were those distributed by the Commonwealth in 1956 to all major Australian state art galleries and museums. These were the nearly 500 bark paintings collected by anthropologist Charles Mountford when he led the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948. While the Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Robert Campbell, made an early commitment and recommended that the Gallery establish a collection of Aboriginal art in 1955 (receiving two gifts from Mountford in the same year), often these donations languished in storage for years. One of the first significant exhibitions was in 1957, when the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) hosted the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art: Arnhem Land Paintings on Bark and Carved Human Forms*. Curated, significantly, by Ronald and Catherine Berndt (anthropologists, not art historians), it named, for the first time, individual artists and identified regional styles.

Unusually, for a state art museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, under the guidance of Deputy Director Tony Tuckson and with the help of American collector Dr Stuart Scougall, had been purposely collecting Aboriginal art since the late 1950s. Tuckson and Scougall had made expeditions to Arnhem Land and the Northern Territory coast in 1958 and 1959 with the express intention of collecting Aboriginal art. The trips were funded by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and some of the art collected went into the Gallery's collection, while other works were donated later by Scougall. Tuckson was instrumental in encouraging the first serious acceptance of Aboriginal art in Australian art museums. For years, however, the collection of Aboriginal art remained in an almost invisible basement gallery. Tuckson did, however, organise an exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*, a broad survey show, which toured Australian state galleries in 1960-61. These types of exhibition were exceptional rather than common events, though they did reveal a wellspring of material waiting for fresh interpretation and understanding. Certainly they served as indicators of a more ancient Australia, signifying a history other than the Eurocentric art
tradition derived from a colonial past. Nevertheless, their main effect was as gestures towards the assimilation of Aboriginal art into western art traditions.

Subsequently, at a 1962 seminar on the architecture of galleries and museums of art, held at the Australian National University (noted in chapter one), the National Gallery of Victoria Director, Eric Westbrook, declared that one of ‘the requirements of the galleries in the National Capital is a Gallery of Australian Aboriginal Art, regarded as Art and not as Anthropology.’11 (’The galleries’ refers to a proposal of the time to include a group of galleries celebrating national cultural achievements in a National Centre on Capital Hill, including a future National Gallery.) Westbrook qualified this need for a Gallery of Australian Aboriginal Art by saying that ‘visitors to the Capital, particularly overseas visitors, would like to see this sort of display, if only to be able to correct the impressions they could form of Aboriginal art from the ash trays and other “typical Australian souvenirs”.’12

Westbrook did not, however, collect Aboriginal art for the National Gallery of Victoria because he believed that it belonged in the museum, not the gallery – that is, it was anthropology, not art. Why his views altered for the national capital is, perhaps, due to Canberra’s role as a symbol of the nation. While Aboriginal art was not considered appropriate for his own institution, he appeared to recognise that it had a place in national consciousness, and therefore deserved a place in national institutions.

The proposal for a Gallery of Australian Aboriginal Art, reveals, on the one hand, that the Australian art world was beginning to willingly consider Aboriginal art outside the context of anthropology and to accept its place in the world of art, on the basis of aesthetic and cultural merit. On the other hand, the reference to it is also quite dismissive – a facility needed to cater for tourists and to ‘correct’ the impressions left by what were obviously considered to be inauthentic souvenirs. However, the fact that Aboriginal art

12 ibid.
and culture was starting to be recognised as unique and to be considered emblematic of the nation, was an idea, that if not entirely new in the art world (for example, the earlier interest of artist Margaret Preston, art teacher Frances Derham and others\textsuperscript{13}), was a new attitude in Australian art galleries.

It is often argued that genuine interest in Indigenous art did not even enter the world of Australian public galleries until around the early 1980s and still took years to be fully accepted, as will be seen later in this chapter. Yet Ian McLean, noting Margaret Preston’s interest, through the 1920s and 1930s, in finding ‘in Aboriginal art the source for a distinctive Australian identity’, suggested that in an ‘alliance between art, anthropology, modernism and nationalism, Aboriginal art became the foundation and inspiration of a modern, national Australian art.’\textsuperscript{14} McLean asserts that the upsurge of nationalism produced by the 1940s experience of war time created a new independence from Britain and that nativism was transformed ‘into a distinctly anti-imperial Indigenous consciousness.’\textsuperscript{15} In fact, he went on to say that historian Russel Ward’s 1958 description of an ‘outback ethos’ and a ‘nomad tribe’ of bushmen ‘incorporated Aboriginality into the new national mythos, and so provided the opportunity for an appreciation of Aboriginal art and culture.’\textsuperscript{16} Ward had in fact been criticized for underestimating the role of Indigenous people in Australia, though it should be noted that, in his book \textit{The Australian Legend} he was not writing a history of Australia so much as an exploration of the development of a bush mythology, one which

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Frances Derham (1894 – 1987) was an art teacher who visited Aboriginal missions at Hermannsburg, Central Australia (1938) and Aurukun (North Queensland) in 1948. She held art classes for the children, encouraging them to draw and paint about their lives. The collection of drawings they made is now held in the National Gallery of Australia. Margaret Preston was an artist who was inspired by the colours and design of Aboriginal art and was one of the first in the art world to recognize it as an independent art form. See Smith, Bernard, 1971 (2nd edition), \textit{Australian Painting 1788 – 1970}, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, and McLean, Ian, \textit{White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art}, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} ibid., p. 88.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ward, Russel, 1958, \textit{The Australian Legend}, Oxford University Press.
\end{itemize}
certainly entertained the possibility of incorporating white myths about Aboriginality.\textsuperscript{17}

Aboriginal art, or at least a popularised version of it, exemplified diversely in numerous prints of Albert Namatjira's paintings and Aboriginal motifs by white designers on articles of domestic craft such as platters and tea cups, was extremely fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s, but there seemed to be a wide gap between the popular imagination and the judgements of the art world. For instance, the 1940s and 1950s had brought celebrity status to artist Albert Namatjira, who represented the 'success' of assimilation policies. However there was little understanding of his deep relationship to the country he painted, and, apart from Namatjira, the public's only real acquaintance with Aboriginal art was limited to work produced largely for the souvenir market. Certainly there was no education about meaning or symbolism or the relation of Aboriginal art either to tradition or to contemporary experience. The art world meanwhile condemned Namatjira's painting, considering it derivative and inauthentic, neither European nor Aboriginal, but simply clever copies of an already outdated European landscape style.\textsuperscript{18}

To be authentic, Indigenous art clearly had to be traditional, and preferably from pre European contact, and, at the time, was considered to be inferior to western art traditions. Not only was this a result of art world ignorance of the complexity of Aboriginal art and its close relationship with land, but also of a failure to understand the ceremonial and ephemeral character of some Indigenous artistic practices while western art privileged painting and sculpture as art's highest expression. Yet Aboriginal art was beginning to be seen by white society as a distinctive indicator of Australian-ness, marking

\textsuperscript{17} Russel Ward published \textit{The Australian Legend} in 1958. In it he described the bush legend of Australia as fully developed by the 1890s, and producing a myth of the Australian (male) as rough but egalitarian, independent but loyal to his mates and conscious of the need for a 'fair-go'.

the nation as independent and unique. The process of change was particularly marked by the developing activism of Aboriginal people from the early 1960s onwards. The struggle for recognition and the assertion of Aboriginal rights led to an increasing awareness of instances of exploitation and misunderstanding. Educational and cultural institutions in particular were gradually becoming aware of the need to address their own policies and practices in relation to Indigenous experience.

By 1971, when the legislation to formally establish the Gallery finally began to be drafted under Prime Minister William McMahon, the final design for the gallery was approved, and James Mollison had been appointed as Acting Director, Australia was still focused on assimilation policies for Indigenous people. The belief that so-called ‘primitive’ art represented a past stage of human development persisted and the National Gallery initially fell into line with this thinking. In fact, to be modern, as the National Gallery aspired to be, meant to overcome old differences between ethnicity, tribes and clans – the state and its cultural institutions were the new structures that unified, assimilated and covered over regional, cultural and social differences. In the same year the journal *Art and Australia* published an article on what the author called the National Collection of Primitive Art, which at the time was under the aegis of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board. In fact, this was most likely to be a reference to the National Ethnographic Collection, then housed in the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra. At the time, the Advisory Board considered the collection would become the responsibility of a future National Museum, but this particular article had the planning of the National Gallery in mind. The author Graeme Petty, noting that

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19 Ian McLean (op. cit) referred to the desert usurping the bush as a national metaphor in Australia in the 1930s and that by the Second World War and after, aboriginality was incorporated into national myths.

20 For example, Henry Reynolds' work, op. cit.

21 After the 1967 referendum, the history and experiences of Aboriginal people became more prominent. In 1973, the Australia Council established the Aboriginal Arts Board and arts centres were set up in many Indigenous communities. Awareness of Indigenous needs and interests was becoming more widespread. For further discussion, see Sutton, Peter (ed.), 1988, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Ringwood, Viking, particularly chapter five, pp. 143 – 179.

'Australia's chief collections of primitive art are those in the various State natural history museums', outlined the case for its potential future inclusion in the National Gallery in terms that were typical for the time. He remarked that:

The historical reason for this circumstance is that "Art" used to be considered the privilege of "civilised" man, while the imaginative exercises of his less advanced fellows were held as more properly the responsibility of those curious about man's pre-civilised and primitive antecedents.

Aboriginal material culture, he seemed to be admitting, could now be included in the western category 'art'. Petty's reference to 'imaginative exercises' clearly distinguishes between an unrefined, simple or 'natural' art and that of more complex, sophisticated cultures. He reinforced this by saying that:

 Artists themselves were in fact largely responsible for bringing primitive art to the attention of the critical public. They not only drew inspiration from it but enthused about it and bought it. Even today artists feature second only to galleries as buyers of primitive art.23

'Artists' is a reference to western modernist artists, those inspired stylistically by 'primitive' art, in the tradition of Picasso, Braque, Epstein and others. He went on to declare 'primitive' art as less a 'personal statement of the artist' than a 'functional art of sacred and memorial work, or the giving of decorative finish to mundane objects of everyday life.'24 Petty suggested it was surprising that there should be any move to include 'primitive' art in the future National Gallery, but his comments clearly indicate that the issue was up for discussion and that the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board's intentions for the National Ethnographic Collection were by no means cut and dried.

Modern western art had appropriated 'primitive' art since the early twentieth century. Modernist art history used the term 'primitivism' in a romantic sense, that is, as part of a fond reflection on the past, a past that western

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24 Petty, 1971, op. cit., p.3.
culture has progressed beyond, in becoming more and more modern, yet one that needed to be ‘rediscovered’ to reinvest art with naive honesty and pure form.\footnote{Sec, for example, the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, 1984, \textit{Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern}, curated by William Rubin, and the accompanying catalogue, Rubin, William (ed.),1985, \textit{Primitivism in 20th Century Art}, Vols. 1 and 2, New York, MoMA.} In 1938 American art critic Robert Goldwater used the term ‘primitivistic’ in association with modern art, to mean fresh, spontaneous, child-like, underdeveloped, sometimes wild and savage. Unlike the anthropologist Franz Boas, who as early as 1900 had challenged racial theories on the so-called realistic inadequacies of Inuit and African art,\footnote{Franz Boas was a German anthropologist, best known for his book \textit{The Mind of Primitive Man} (1911). He published a book on the art of Indigenous cultures in 1927 called \textit{Primitive Art}, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.} Goldwater viewed ‘primitive art’ as ‘other’, as an earlier stage of human evolution. He noted the appropriation of ‘primitive’ art, especially from Africa and the Pacific, by artists like Picasso, Matisse and Gauguin, as a means to access the subconscious, raw emotion, and a somewhat ‘purer’ sense of form and identity, apparently stripped of the civilising layers of western European society.\footnote{See Goldwater, Robert, 1938, \textit{Primitivism in Modern Painting}, New York, Harper and Brothers.} For Goldwater, primitivism was as much an intellectual exercise in the arts, as an aesthetic one – it was about seeking a truth, an essence, a sense of the timeless and universal.\footnote{ibid.} These, of course, were notions applied to ‘primitive’ art by Europeans and Americans with little real knowledge of the cultural and social belief systems in which they were made. Aboriginal art was so little understood that it even fell outside the purview of most western art’s romanticism of the ‘primitive’, hence Petty’s surprise at its possible prominence in a future national gallery.

Since then there have been numerous critiques of the notion of ‘primitive art’, recognizing it as a category constructed by artistic modernism, and noting, particularly, its tendency to appropriate Indigenous arts, which then only exist in subordinate relations to western art, and its tendency to create archetypes of universal human creativity.\footnote{See Clifford, James, 1988, \textit{The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art}, Harvard University Press; Torgovnick, Marianna 1990, \textit{Gone Primitive}, University of California Press; footnote continues overleaf} These critiques found a particular
focus in responses to the 1984 Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* in which curator William Rubin traced the impact of ‘tribal’ arts on major modernist art movements of the twentieth century, suggesting an affinity that was merely on the basis of abstract design and certainly not any kind of intimate relationship or understanding.30

Perhaps a response to the notion of ‘primitivism’, certainly from a sense of the mythologising of Australian identity, the inclusion of Aboriginal art had actually been part of the planning for the National Gallery since the mid 1960s, though it remained both submerged in other priorities and conveniently ignored by Director James Mollison (despite urgings by anthropologist Anthony Forge, a member of the ‘Primitive Art’ collection advisory committee31). As early as 1965, the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board presented some discussion notes they had compiled on a National Art Gallery in Canberra to the National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry, and here many of the ideas discussed earlier in the 1962 ANU seminar resurfaced. The notes made reference to the title ‘National Gallery of Australian Art’, and stated that ‘the present buying policy is directed towards acquiring Australian works,’32 perhaps with consideration for a future gallery. One suggestion made was that ‘a National Gallery should collect the art of Australia’s neighbours in the Asian, South East Asian, and Oceania areas – even perhaps regional art of the Pacific coasts of the Americas...Australian state galleries contain very little of the art of these areas,’33 it was noted. In particular, the suggestion for a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia was maintained, though it appeared that this was then being proposed as an

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31 Interview with Professor Luke Taylor, Deputy-Principal – Research, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), by author, 5 August, 2005.
32 1965, ‘National Art Gallery for Canberra: Preliminary Notes for Discussion by Art Advisory Board, 11th August, 1965’ in Tas Drysdale’s papers, as member of National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry, collection of Mary Eagle, Canberra. These papers were circulated to the Committee members for consideration. p. 3. Though Tas (Russell) Drysdale did not attend committee meetings (he was overseas) he maintained constant communication with the Committee and wrote many submissions to it.
33 ibid, p. 4.
independent institution (and by 1975, in the Pigott Report, it became part of the proposal for a National Museum).

Yet when the Gallery Committee presented its final report in March 1966 it confirmed that the National Collection should include ‘Australian Aboriginal art, chosen for aesthetic merit’ and ‘art representing the high cultural achievement of Australia’s neighbours in southern and eastern Asia and the Pacific Islands – a collection of the latter before its disappearance being a matter of urgency’\(^{34}\) (and clearly seeing all these arts as no longer living traditions). The report added that ‘Aboriginal work is intended to be included in Australian art’ and its acquisition should not be ‘for anthropological reasons…’\(^{35}\) Following concerns that at first there would not be enough work to fill the building, the Committee even recommended borrowing Aboriginal art from various Commonwealth departments, state galleries and at least one state university, who were not yet able to adequately display it.\(^{36}\)

The first acquisition of Aboriginal art by the National Gallery was in 1972 – a group of 1950s bark paintings from Groote Eylandt, followed in 1976 by a collection of 139 barks by the renowned Yirawala from West Arnhem Land. These acquisitions were both donations, not purchases, but in 1979-80 the Gallery started buying carvings and paintings created by living Aboriginal artists. Ruth McNicholl (Acting Curator of Primitive Art) was sent to Arnhem Land to visit artists and communities, though the collection remained very small at this stage. Earlier, in 1977, art dealer Clive Evatt, who had represented Aboriginal art in his Sydney Hogarth Galleries since 1972, had reflected on the Committee of Inquiry’s recommendation for the inclusion of Aboriginal art, and noted that ‘this vital part of Australian art has been mimimised apparently in order not to overlap with the collection in

\(^{34}\) Draft Report, op. cit. p. 3.
\(^{36}\) ibid., p. 3.
the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Certainly no-one then employed in the development of the National Gallery collection gave it any priority. Perhaps these new collecting efforts were a response to this criticism, though the Gallery certainly was conscious of not treading on the territory of other collecting institutions, and the Committee of Inquiry had, in notes provided to the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board in 1965, suggested that state galleries should specialise and not be competitive with each other and that this was also a consideration for the National Gallery. This was hardly an issue in the collecting of Aboriginal art, however. Rather, it was unusual for galleries to collect in this area at all, still believing it to be the preserve of museums of natural history. However, the National Museum of Victoria which was then co-located with the National Gallery of Victoria, had held an exhibition of Aboriginal art in 1929, the first to have had an association with a public art gallery, and which strongly emphasised the art content of the work, as opposed to a strictly ethnographic museum display.

Radical change was, however, taking place. New forms of art, like the acrylic canvases from Papunya, enabled Aboriginal art to be seen, for the first time, as contemporary art. The 1970s saw the development of government-funded art centres in remote Aboriginal communities, established to coordinate, promote and sell Indigenous art, often as a way of creating an economic base for community financial independence. The Australia Council

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37 Cited by Peter Tomory, 1977, 'The acquisition policy from the inside out', in papers from Art Association of Australia seminar Australian Public Gallery Acquisition Policies, Melbourne, 28 May, p. 30.
39 I am indebted to my colleague Bernice Murphy who has researched the history of early public museum and art gallery exhibitions of Aboriginal art. She has established that there was likely to have been less distinction between the activities of the co-located National Gallery of Victoria and National Museum of Victoria in 1929 and that the 1929 exhibition could be considered to have the imprimateur of both institutions. This was discussed in a Humanities Research Centre (HRC) seminar at the ANU on Indigenous issues in Australian museums, 12 August 2005. Speakers were Angela Philp, Bernice Murphy and Lee-Anne Hall.
incorporated an Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973 which was also aimed at supporting the production and distribution of Aboriginal art.\textsuperscript{41} These developments encouraged Aboriginal artists to produce work for the market and began to make Aboriginal art more readily available, eventually finding support in public art museums and subsequently a wide range of commercial galleries.

Director James Mollison at first believed, like many museum curators, that Aboriginal art belonged in the museum not the gallery, until he visited Central Australia himself in late 1981 for a meeting of the Australian Gallery Directors’ Council and made a further visit to Ramingining the following year.\textsuperscript{42} The National Gallery, while not initially enthusiastic in collecting Aboriginal art, did, as already noted, begin to expand on a very small collection of ‘primitive’ art in the late 1970s (adding to work collected by the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board from places such as Papua New Guinea, in advance of its Independence). By 1981 it included what were described in the annual report as ‘several typical and excellent bark paintings by artists living and working in their tribal areas in Arnhem Land’ and ‘also … a set of objects connected with the Morning Star ceremony, decorated with finely-twisted bush string and clusters of the delicate plumage of tropical birds’.\textsuperscript{43} The artists were not acknowledged individually and these descriptions were curiously incidental, even in their placement in the report, coming after descriptions of acquisitions of Indonesian and Peruvian textiles, pre-Columbian ceramics, and Nigerian bronzes.\textsuperscript{44} Yet Mollison, meanwhile, was now reportedly a convert, considering Aboriginal art to be one of the

\textsuperscript{41} In establishing the Australia Council, with its boards representing different areas of the arts, Gough Whitlam sought to create an administration that provided ‘independence from political pressures and safeguards against centralised and authoritarian tendencies’. Whitlam, Gough, 1985, The Whitlam Government, Ringwood, Viking, p. 558.
\textsuperscript{42} Curator Wally Caruana detailed Mollison’s ‘epiphany’ in his essay ‘The Collection of Indigenous Australian Art: Beginnings and Some Highlights’ in Green, Pauline (ed.), 2003, Building the Collection, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia.
\textsuperscript{44} ibid.
great art traditions of the world and describing it, according to curator Wally Caruana, as 'akin to living in Florence at the time of the Renaissance.'45

Just prior to the opening of the Gallery in 1982, the name of the department of Primitive Art was changed to become Arts of Aboriginal Australia, Oceania, African and Pre-Columbian America (and also included American 'Indian' and 'Eskimo' art). While this reflected a new awareness of the misnomer 'primitive' as applied to the arts of Indigenous peoples, it still lumped them all together in a grab bag of 'other' art. Interestingly, Asian art had a different status, particularly the art of India, China and Japan, which had long been studied in the west and was seen as both historical (rather than ahistorical) and as reaching aesthetic heights comparable to that of western art. In the Gallery there was already a small department of Asian and Southeast Asian Art including Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Indonesian and Burmese art, among others. Although it focused at first on objects of religious iconology from the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, it soon expanded its collections to include textiles, especially from Indonesia. Contemporary Asian art was not yet collected.

At opening, the chronological Australian art display included a few examples of Aboriginal art, though at this stage they were shown more for historical or comparative interest, such as having an Aboriginal work next to a Margaret Preston painting to indicate its influence on her work.46 Still, this was a unique approach at the time, even if by simply acknowledging, in however minimal a way, the continued existence of Aboriginal cultural expressions in parallel with the survey of 'white' Australian art history. The NGA had 'much to learn about Indigenous culture, and it's early displays included material that was secret/sacred, though to its credit, it was rapidly removed as soon as the Gallery became aware of it.47 The Gallery's commitment was reinforced by the inclusion of a specialist in Aboriginal art, Jennifer Hoff, in

46 I am aware of this from personal experience, but it has also been noted in Andrew Sayers’ essay in the Gallery's 20th Anniversary publication Green, Pauline (ed.), 2003, Building the Collection, p. 121.
47 This has never been publicly discussed, but I am aware of this from my own experience working in the Gallery at the time.
1984 also saw the creation of a separate Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art with its own budget for acquisitions and with a brief to collect contemporary Aboriginal art, including urban art, and historical work when available. The curator, Wally Caruana, who had originally worked under Ruth McNicoll, was not an Indigenous person. He had, however, developed strong links with Indigenous communities across Australia, which he used to broaden both the focus of the collection and to develop good relations between the Gallery and Indigenous artists.

Past exhibitions of Aboriginal art, in places like the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, had been broad generic surveys of what was considered classic traditional art, and artists had remained unnamed, with the exception of the 1957 Art Gallery of Western Australia exhibition. By the 1980s and early 1990s Indigenous artists were becoming known by name — as individuals rather than as faceless representatives of a generalised culture - and National Gallery exhibitions began to focus on regions or areas of interest and highlighted the work of particular individual artists. Among those who became prominent in Gallery exhibitions at this time were George Milpurrurru, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Yirawala and Rover Thomas. The Gallery remained staunchly committed to its aesthetic premise however, and little if any additional information was provided to visitors in these early years, though later on, with the influence of new ideas about visitor information, extended labels

48 Interview with Alison French, who was employed, along with the author, in the Gallery’s Education Department in the first few years after opening.
50 These included My Country, My Story: Recent Paintings by Twelve Arnhem Land Artists; Ancestors and Spirits: Aboriginal Painting from Arnhem Land in the 1950s and 1960s; and Aboriginal Art of Western Australia (all in the 1986/87 financial year), and The Art of George Milpurrurru (1992/93), the first at the NGA to focus on an individual Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artist.
did offer some of the dreaming stories, clan and geographic information. Education staff in the 1980s were advised by Curator of Education Terence Measham to only speak in aesthetic terms about Aboriginal work, and while it was acceptable to detail some of the stories linked to a bark or an acrylic painting, it was not acceptable to use anthropological or ethnographic material to support the understanding or interpretation of a work.\(^{51}\)

This was typical of all art museums at the time, not just the National Gallery. Art historians and curators tended to believe that an anthropological approach to Indigenous art reinforced its status as 'other', perhaps a consequence of its remaining in the natural history museum for so long that, in Morphy's words, the 'art was lost in the ethnography.'\(^{52}\) As anthropologists George Marcus and Fred Myers, have pointed out, art was, and is still, despite postmodern critiques, defined 'by the creation of aesthetic experience through the disinterested contemplation of objects as art objects, removed from instrumental associations.'\(^{53}\) While art insisted on its own autonomous space and saw itself as the one area which is open to all difference (all the while subsuming it in its own historical and critical discourses), anthropology saw material culture as part of a whole social and cultural system. Recent critiques promulgated by, for example, feminism and subaltern studies, have enabled a breakdown of these rigid categories and it is now possible for art and anthropology to work together in analysing and understanding Indigenous cultures.\(^{54}\) In the case of the National Gallery however, this generally remains little tested.

\(^{51}\) Interview with Alison French, who was employed, along with the author, in the Gallery's Education Department in the first few years after opening. French also considered that Measham's directive was part of an intention to allow only specialist Jennifer Hoff to use anthropological material in discussion of Aboriginal works of art, keeping the disciplines of art history and anthropology quite distinct.


Eventually solo shows began to appear, the first of which was the George Milpurruru exhibition at the NGA in 1993, and Aboriginal artists began to achieve career recognition for their individual creativity, also in adaptation to the demands of the art market, which encouraged the assessment of an artist’s work in terms of career development and the discerning of influences and stylistic changes. It is significant that, by this time, the Aboriginal art market was well-established and increasingly internationalised. Collectors from Europe and the USA were major investors in the market and national and international exhibitions heralded Aboriginal art as the first time art from Australia was accorded the status of a major international force or movement.55

After 1984, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art rapidly expanded its collection and in the twenty-first century it is now overseen by an Indigenous curator, Brenda Croft, thus returning a measure of control of the representation of Indigenous culture to Indigenous people. The NGA’s celebration of Aboriginal art has been influential in embedding its reputation, giving it the imprimateur of a national and respected institution, and, by extension, has increased the value placed on Indigenous cultures.

In 1988, the Bicentenary year of white settlement in, or invasion of, Australia, the *Aboriginal Memorial* was installed in the NGA and was intended as a potent symbol of both the struggles of Aboriginal people over the

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previous 200 years, and their survival. The Bicentenary of Australia was not a
time of celebration for Aboriginal people. An installation of 200 hollow log
coffins from Central Arnhem Land (one for each year of European
occupation since 1788), it is primarily a war memorial. The visitors’ path
through the Memorial follows that of the Glyde River in Arnhem Land and
the hollow log coffins are placed in clan territory along the river. Initiated by
Djon Mundine, then the Ramingining Art Advisor in Central Arnhem Land,
it was created by a group of 43 artists, including senior artists such as Paddy
Dhathangu and Jimmy Wululu. It represents ‘a forest of souls, a war
cemetery and the funeral rites for all indigenous Australians who have been
denied a proper burial.’

The Memorial, essentially an NGA commission with the full support of
James Mollison and initially shown at the 1988 Biennale of Sydney, currently
stands in Gallery One, at the main entrance to the National Gallery – the
Gallery making a political statement itself. It is significant to note, however,
that its reception at the NGA has never been controversial, despite its
powerful comment on the tragedy of 200 years of Aboriginal history since
white invasion. And it must be said that, because it incorporates traditional
techniques and materials, it is not necessarily perceived as a political
statement by white audiences, especially when the National Gallery contains
works that are much more overtly and recognisably political for audiences

[Accessed: 8.8.03].

57 I have been unable to find any negative reports about this installation in the National
Gallery, either in the media or in arts industry publications.
used to social realism and contemporary media. Its cross-cultural nature, incorporating both traditional styles and materials and the form of western installation art, is open to misinterpretation, especially as it is now surrounded by a survey of Aboriginal art on the walls, making its meaning indistinguishable from the broader survey. This raises an important question. Does the environment of the art museum mitigate against its politics, encasing it in an aestheticised framework and consequently overriding its political meaning?

The meaning of the Memorial is articulated thoroughly on the NGA’s website, but in the building itself, despite information being available on extended labels, its presentation tends to seal the work off in an aesthetic prism. The very ambience of the space reinforces this. Grand high ceilings, an elegantly tonal setting, highly visible uniformed guards reminding the visitor that the space contains valuable assets, the tasteful size and placement of labels so as not to interfere with the visual apprehension of the art, the castle-like bush-hammered concrete walls – all these things operate subliminally to adjust the visitor’s behaviour and attitude, intended to quieten them physically and spiritually so that they might experience the art in reverential and quiet contemplation. One’s physical presence becomes diminutive in inverse proportion to the works of art which are, after all, centre stage. The world of everyday life is abandoned at the door.

Yet the museological desire to be part of an engaged cultural public sphere in which issues of common concern, especially moral and ethical ones, may be discussed, requires an imposition of the everyday. Aesthetic contemplation, in this context, should not be the only goal. If the art has something to say, then the art museum must provide opportunities to debate these propositions and statements. If the Aboriginal Memorial were in the National Museum it would undoubtedly have provoked a very different response, especially in the context of the ‘history wars’ which I discuss further in chapter six. The context of a vast array of historical and anthropological

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58 Angela Philp field notes, 2003.
evidence would serve to shift the emphasis of the work, bringing its content, in the sense of its meaning, to centre stage, instead of privileging its undoubtedly powerful aesthetic impact. Yet it may well have been considered far too polemical for the critics of the National Museum, so concerned they have been with rejecting the so-called ‘black armband’ view of history. In the National Gallery it is possible to separate the statement of the individual work of art from any perceived political stand of the institution itself. The fact that art demands autonomy, dissociating it from some social and critical contexts, can also allow the Gallery to be a site for often quite controversial statements, without the Gallery necessarily being seen as participating in the making of these statements. Unfortunately, this same apparent autonomy is, in the art museum, a willing participant, indeed collaborator, in the system of the art market, needing the art museum to affirm, by its professional and aesthetic judgements, the maintenance of an interdependent system of patronage and commodification. The work of the curator in selecting, ordering and interpreting works of art is not made visible, and quite deliberately so. In the National Museum, because the artefacts (they are not objects) are not autonomous – they are used first and foremost to illustrate a story, an idea, a period of time, or an experience, even when they might be seen as purely aesthetic objects, or art, elsewhere – they become embedded in the museum’s larger narrative.

Some artists have regarded the autonomy of the object as a way of enabling art to critique the institutions of art, along with broader social issues, yet the very placement of work within the Gallery is already complicit with the art market. In fact, the Gallery can appear to be ‘objective’ and even-handed’ while including controversial work, by justifying its inclusion on purely aesthetic grounds. How then can the National Gallery, professing itself, like the National Museum, to be a site for public debate\(^{59}\) (as will be seen in chapter five), actually foster any debate while obscuring or minimising certain aspects of works of art?

\(^{59}\) Note Director Dr Brian Kennedy’s statements about the NGA as a forum for debate, for example, the Qantas Birthday Lecture 1997 *The National Gallery: Temple and Forum*, unpublished manuscript. This will be addressed further in chapter five.
In the resurgence of Aboriginal art in the late twentieth century, its power is as much political as it is aesthetic. Because so much Aboriginal art is closely linked to country, to Indigenous law and society, to Dreamings, or to their loss, and the removal of people from these connections, every work makes a claim about Aboriginal experience in this country. A major force in the international art scene and one of the most significant developments in Australian art, Aboriginal art is now a solid fixture in Australian cultural life, its quality and importance largely unquestioned. As art historian Sylvia Kleinert and curator Margo Neale have noted (and even the fact that Aboriginal art is now the subject of an Oxford Companion that they edited testifies to its importance) 'it is clear that Australia’s Indigenous people have used “art” to reaffirm their autonomous concerns, and they have deliberately sought to engage in dialogue with the colonising society.'60 As will be seen in later chapters, its impact is very different in the context of a history museum.

**Recognising Indigenous history**

The political force of Indigenous art has helped to draw attention to the historical record, particularly the way it has been incorporated in the NMA’s *First Australians* gallery. Since the early 1960s, historians have been investigating the erasure of Aboriginal people from Australian history — recovering material and helping to amend the record of Aboriginal experience and struggle.61 The National Museum, opening nineteen years after the National Gallery, was in a position to acknowledge the changes in Australian society in the intervening years, particularly the influence of the NGA in cementing the respect for Aboriginal art in a broader community. Yet it also learned right at the beginning of its development from the earlier practices of art museums such as the Art Gallery of Western Australia and

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61 Among historians who have written on Aboriginal history are Bain Attwood, Geoffrey Bolton, Manning Clark, Rhys Jones, Henry Reynolds, Lloyd Robson, Charles Rowley, and Lyndall Ryan.
the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Their early exhibitions recognised the
good of Aboriginal art, but tended to isolate the art from its social and
cultural contexts. The National Museum saw that it was necessary to employ
inter-disciplinary approaches to the interpretation of Indigenous life. From
the beginning of its planning, Indigenous histories and cultures were at the
centre of its vision, but they were to be seen as both independent from and
intertwined with white history and culture.

It is important not to underestimate the effects of this difference in timing
between the opening of these two national institutions. When the National
Gallery opened in 1982 it was the crowning expression of an, until then,
largely unquestioned will to modernity, born of a 1960s vision of an iconic
national tribute to Australian cultural maturity and achievement. The NGA
has grown and changed over the intervening years, responding to new social
critiques and adapting to museological change. Its modern conception
however has been maintained and its adaptations are essentially around the
edges rather than at its core. In contrast, the National Museum might be
said to have had two 'births', one in 1975 and one in 2001. Notably, they are
bracketed by two distinctive public celebrations - 1975 was the first
International Women's Year, a catalyst for feminist thought and critiques,
and 2001 was the Centenary of Federation, a year when the project of
Reconciliation appeared to be foundering and Australia, under a conservative
government, seemed to re-engage with many of its colonial myths, such as a
belief in a peaceful colonial past. Conceptually, the National Museum
belongs to the original 1975 vision, when, rather than continuing to gestate
and change for years, it actually was already philosophically fully-formed. So,
despite having to wait another twenty-six years, the museum kept the faith of
both the spirit and the major recommendations of its original brief. This
brief was not found lacking over those twenty-six years. Instead, the tenets
of the Pigott Report were reaffirmed and refined by developments in
museological thinking and by the acceleration of Aboriginal activism and the
explosion of contemporary Aboriginal art. Despite the shifting fortunes of
the project under a series of Directors, Professor Mulvaney and others had
failed in the beginning to seize the political moment and secure initial
funding, instead focusing on creating the ideal vision seen in the Report. Not
long after the Report was published the Whitlam Government lost office,
and the political will to create the museum disappeared. Mulvaney
nevertheless kept pushing for the museum’s realisation, particularly keeping
its unique vision alive. Yet by 2001, when it finally opened, the political
moment had shifted radically and so the museum faced a struggle with its
political masters that may not have occurred if it had opened according to its
original timetable.

We must step back a moment however and revisit this original vision. As
discussed in chapter two, the 1975 Pigott Report, recommended that a
Museum of Australia be established in Canberra and that one of its main
themes should be ‘Aboriginal man [sic] in Australia’. The Pigott committee,
as noted earlier, had commented that ‘curiously, Aboriginal art had long been
displayed impersonally in natural science museums in Australia but only
when Aboriginal art was “discovered” by art galleries did the artists become
known as people rather than as nameless cyphers…’.62

It is significant that the early role of art museums in the individualising of
Aboriginal art was acknowledged by the Committee – and is a reminder that
while museums had been languishing in museological terms, galleries had
been becoming more adventurous and exploratory. These were still early
days for the presentation of Aboriginal art in Australian art museums, yet the
Pigott committee was already well aware of a dramatic shift occurring. Also
observing, as already noted in chapter two, that there was no major
institution in Australia that really focused on history, the authors recognised
that the directors of early natural history museums in Australia were mostly
biologists or geologists and this was where the emphasis of these museums
lay. These early museums were also interested in the development of man,
but from an evolutionary perspective, thus depicting Aborigines, according

62 1975, Museums in Australia 1975: Report of the Planning Committee of Inquiry on
Museums and National Collections including the Report of the Planning Committee on the
Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, p. 5. Known generally as The Pigott Report. Around the
same time, a parallel inquiry by the Hope Committee produced a Report on the National
Estate, 1974, primarily considering immovable heritage – historic sites and buildings. Its
recommendations were also reflected in the Pigott Report.
to the Pigott Report as 'living exemplars of one of the earliest stages in the
evolution of mankind.' The Report noted that Professor Baldwin Spencer, a
biologist and Honorary Director of the Museum of Victoria from 1899 to
1928, believed that Aborigines remained on the cultural level of the Stone
Age. Thus, they said, Aboriginal people ‘were treated as living fossils...only
recently have they been seen by museums as people rather than fauna.' It
also noted that this attitude to Indigenous people was not confined to
Australia, but could also be seen in museums in America, France and Britain.
For Australian museums, Aboriginal culture (seen at this time as just one
culture) was located firmly in a model of ethnography and natural history.
Just as James Mollison had early on believed that Aboriginal art belonged in
the natural history museum, these museums were unable or unwilling to see
 Aboriginal society outside the limits of their natural science disciplines. Not
surprisingly, the committee of inquiry concluded that ‘one of the strongest
arguments we offer...for a new national museum in Australia is the belief
that there both the Aboriginal and European histories of Australia can be
seen in a wider and fairer perspective' — effectively a proposal for a more
cross-cultural institution.

At the same time as the Pigott Committee report was being compiled, a
separate planning committee, convened by the Special Minister of State and
Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, was created to report on establishing a Gallery
of Aboriginal Australia. Including Aboriginal representatives and Chaired by
Professor John Mulvaney, it was to report to the Committee of Inquiry on
Museums and National Collections (the Pigott committee) of which

63 ibid, p. 16.
64 ibid.
65 ibid., p. 17.
66 The Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia included Professor John
Mulvaney (see chapter two) as Chairman, K. Colbung (an Indigenous leader who
championed the cause of land rights education and Aboriginal cultural identity), R. Edwards
(responsible for the 1981 Report on Museum Policy and Development in South Australia), J.
Gwadbu (an Indigenous man from Goulburn Island), P. K. Lauer (Anthropologist), D. R.
Moore, H. Parker, Dick Roughsey (the first Chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board, Australia
Council), W.E.H.Stanner (the anthropologist), P. J. Ucko (Archaeologist)and M. Valadian (a
writer, researcher on Aboriginal education).
67 Mulvaney is an archaeologist and Emeritus Professor of Prehistory at ANU. Over many
years he has been a public advocate for Aboriginal heritage and for the NMA. See Bonyhady,
Tim and Griffiths, Tom (eds.), 1996, Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities
and the Public Intellectual, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press
Mulvaney was also a member. Mulvaney's report noted ‘that any National Museum established in Canberra would include ethnographic material has been implicit since 1934 when the Australian Government transferred to Canberra what was termed “The National Ethnographic Collection”,’ 68 which was then stored in the basement of the recently completed Australian Institute of Anatomy. 69 It remarked on the requirement to have ‘the active and sympathetic participation of Aboriginal people in its planning, staffing, control and operation – a recognition of the political need for Aboriginal self-determination.’ 70 The report observed that ‘the standing of such a Gallery in Australian national life may come to be seen as an index of its cultural maturity.’ 71 Mulvaney’s report should be seen in the context of scholarly debates that had begun, since the 1960s, to focus on race relations in Australia and the representation of Aboriginal people in its history books. 72 The fact that Mulvaney was an anthropologist was also hugely important, because it was anthropologists who had done much of the research on Indigenous cultures to this point. Increasing understanding of Aboriginal society and history and recognition of the urgent need for tolerance and social justice were features of public debate in the Whitlam Government years and, gradually, attitudes within an informed public began to shift. For example, W.E.H. Stanner’s 1968 ABC Boyer lectures 73 had prompted increased awareness of the injustices suffered by Aboriginal people, and it

68 A Commonwealth collection, the National Ethnographic Collection, in 1975, included 10,000 Aboriginal objects, excluding a large and mainly uncatalogued collection of stone tools, as well as 10,000 objects of Oceanic and Southeast Asian origin. Not as extensive as collections held in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, it was regionally fairly representative. It was added to before 1975 by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.


70 ibid, p. 5.

71 ibid.

72 At this time the term Aboriginal was taken to include both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Scholars writing Aboriginal histories at this time included Henry Reynolds (1987, Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land, Sydney, Allen & Unwin), Rhys Jones (1974, Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits and proper names, Canberra, ANU Press), Charles Rowley (1970, The Destruction of Aboriginal Society, Canberra, ANU Press) and Lyndall Ryan (1981, The Aboriginal Tasmanians, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press).

was in these lectures that he coined his now well-known term ‘the great Australian silence’ to prod a complacent public into action.\textsuperscript{74}

Mulvaney’s report maintained the importance of autonomy for the Gallery, though recognising the desirability of cooperation with any co-located, and complementary institutions. Integration or a close association with the newly created Aboriginal Arts Board and, in particular, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, was considered important to ensure productive collaboration without duplication of efforts. The Mulvaney report placed primary importance on the \textit{Gallery of Aboriginal Australia} conveying ‘the unique spirituality and creativity of Aboriginal society’ and stated that this was not meant to be seen as a ‘gesture of restitution – repairing a guilty national conscience’ or as merely having ‘relevance for, or to be used by Aborigines only’.\textsuperscript{75} It was to be far more active and engaged, promoting genuine understanding in the context of ongoing research and dialogue.

The Pigott and Mulvaney reports, informed by a revisionary anthropology and the new social history, were of their time, but that time had passed when the museum opened. Not only had the politics of the time shifted dramatically to the conservatism of Liberal Prime Minister John Howard, but the tenets of the new museology in the interim had pushed the museum further out of kilter with government and bureaucratic expectations in the early twenty-first century.

Envisaging ‘mutual understanding’ and education, the \textit{Gallery of Aboriginal Australia} was to respect the dignity of Aboriginal culture and society. Aboriginal people, like Indigenous peoples around the world, had misgivings

\textsuperscript{74} Bill Stanner was a well-known Australian anthropologist whose research focused on the links between art, the sacred and the secular in Aboriginal society. Like Mulvaney, he was a public advocate for a better understanding of Aboriginal culture and society. His term ‘the great Australian silence’ referred to the erasure of Aboriginal people from the story of British colonial history and their continued erasure up until the 1960s when a new generation of historians (such as Reynolds and Rowley) began to research and write about Indigenous history and experience.

\textsuperscript{75} Stanner, op. cit., p. 7.
about the way museums had previously treated their cultures. In particular, concerns were expressed that the *Gallery of Aboriginal Australia* not be run by Europeans, nor that it would display items of a secret or sacred nature, or bones of the dead. Another concern was that items of material culture should not be hoarded (as had been so common a practice in museums), but instead returned to their original owners. It was considered important that research should be relevant to Aboriginal needs, rather than benefitting white scholars, and that the Gallery should encourage Aboriginal people as visitors.

Investigating the Australian Institute of Anatomy and its collections, then under the responsibility of the Department of Health, the Pigott committee noted that it held the priceless National Ethnographic Collection, in a poor, cramped and un-air-conditioned space. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was concerned that the collection was deteriorating, and it was recommended that the collection be transferred to an ‘appropriate body’. Consequently, it was suggested that the Australian Institute of Anatomy building be used to ‘implement promptly the proposed national museum though on a very small scale’ and that it could be used as temporary headquarters (up to six or seven years) during the planning and design phases for a first stage of a museum of national history.

While supporting the report of Mulvaney’s Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, the Pigott Committee expressed reservations about it being governed as a separate statutory authority, doubting that divided management could achieve an integrated museum of national history. Included in the aims for the *Gallery of Aboriginal Australia* was the

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78 Mulvaney Report, ibid., pp. 19 - 20

79 ibid., p. 15.

80 Pigott, op. cit., p. 43.
study of '200 years of Aboriginal contact with non-Aboriginal society since 1788, emphasising the grim consequences for Aboriginal culture but also the survival and recent revival of that culture.\textsuperscript{81}

The vision of the Pigott Report for the expression of Aboriginal culture and identity was faithfully maintained through all the long planning years of the National Museum and the proposed \textit{Gallery of Aboriginal Australia} finally took form in \textit{First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People}, eventually presided over by Indigenous curators Djon Mundine (prior to opening) and then Margo Neale (both, interestingly, from visual art backgrounds). As will be seen in chapter six, \textit{First Australians} became the focus of heated debate over the nature and uses of history, particularly because it did not resile from the more difficult aspects of Aboriginal history since white settlement. The oral (and written) record of massacres, the subjugation of Aboriginal land, the practices of the Christian missions, life as fringe dwellers, the restriction of Aboriginal people on reserves, and the stories of the stolen generations, including oral testimony, were told in a frank and open style. Parallel with this history is a respectful, sometimes celebratory, survey of traditional life, new achievements, and continued struggles for native title and human rights. What is evident throughout is a sense of the contemporary vitality of Aboriginal cultures, especially as the historical and oral record is interspersed with Aboriginal works of art that, in this context, become as much political manifestoes as cultural and spiritual expressions, radically different from the National Gallery.

Arguably, while there are examples of different language groups and clans, \textit{First Australians} gives an overall impression of pan-Aboriginality, though this is itself a political statement enabling identification of common concerns. The 2003 Review of the NMA though, discussed in detail in chapter six, recognised the effectiveness of \textit{First Australians} and it survived relatively unscathed, unlike other areas of the museum.

NMA programs have incorporated a range of strategies to ensure the participation of Indigenous people, in addition to telling their own stories in exhibitions. While this reciprocity and the inclusion of Indigenous commentary has established the possibility of multiple narratives in the museum, the Tracking Kulturja Festival was aimed at changing how Indigenous people perceive museums. Emphasising cross-cultural exchange and learning, it incorporated forums, music, arts and crafts, markets, theatre, dance and Indigenous language workshops. Visits by Indigenous people to private storage areas allow them to view and handle objects from their communities. The museum also runs a Repatriation Program that is aimed at ensuring the proper return of Indigenous human remains, from museums around the world, to their original communities. It seeks to locate remains, identify their origin, and have the museum act as a 'halfway house' until negotiations determine agreement on final resting places. These are all activities first mooted by the Pigott and Mulvaney reports.82

The intervening years witnessed a flowering of both contemporary and traditional Aboriginal art, gradually championed and celebrated in art museums, especially the National Gallery. Now, institutions such as the South Australian Museum, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Museum of Western Australia, the Museum of Sydney, the Queensland Museum and more recently the new Bunjilaka gallery in the Museum of Melbourne have all taken a broad view of Indigenous history and culture, exploring regional histories and including art and material culture in their displays.83 They have welcomed the participation of and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the development of their collections, exhibitions and associated activities. These

approaches are now considered ‘best practice’, especially in light of the general acceptance of Museum Australia’s 1993 guidelines on Indigenous collections ‘Previous Possessions, New Obligations’, which set out a range of ethical principles and practices designed to avoid the pitfalls and misunderstandings of the past. The NMA has a strong record of achievement, acquired in just a few short years, but its primary challenge now is to maintain its commitment to a reciprocity between both Indigenous people and the museum and between Indigenous people and white Australians - particularly at a time when public debate on the moral record of postcolonial Indigenous experience is held up in some circles as divisive or as an attempt to belittle white Australia.84

Conclusion

Indigenous cultures and histories have been one of the primary sites for public debates about the nature and character of Australia and its people. Museums play a big role in this reflexive process, not just by their collection and exhibition choices, but also by framing these choices in ways that encourage informed deliberation and questioning.

Since the opening of the National Gallery in 1982, attitudes to and interpretations of Indigenous culture and history have shifted dramatically in museums. Before the 1960s, Aboriginal culture was considered, by the art world, to be the realm of natural history, to have no art, and to be essentially ‘primitive’ or ‘stone age’. The early years of planning for the National Gallery and subsequently the National Museum began, however, to recognise new roles for Aboriginal art, history and material culture. Political activism, from the Freedom Ride to the Land Rights movement and new historical research generated new understandings of the Aboriginal history of Australia since

84 Some members of the print media in Australia reacted very strongly against the museum, especially journalist Miranda Devine, 2001, in ‘A nation trivialized – white history a bad joke,’ in Daily Telegraph, 12 March. See also comments by Keith Windschuttle, 2001, ‘How Not to Run a Museum: People’s History at the Postmodern Museum’ in Quadrant, Vol. 45, No. 9, September, pp. 11 – 19. This will be discussed in chapter six.
settlement, and began to instill new respect for Aboriginal art and culture. Art museums led the way in these new approaches, championing Aboriginal art from an aesthetic rather than a purely ethnographic perspective (even though this came with its own problems), and recognising the creativity of individual artists, who were no longer seen as just generic representatives of their culture. At the time, most Australian museums were still struggling to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture outside the strict realm of natural science, and the postcolonial history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people had been largely erased from the historical records, and certainly never entered the natural history museum.

The Pigott Report also led the way in describing a vision of the National Museum that not only respected the spirituality and creativity of Aboriginal culture and its close relationship to land, but also made it a central and distinguishing character of the future museum. The NMA, well aware of Indigenous mistrust of museums due to the long western history of mistreatment of Indigenous cultures by museums, sought a new range of strategies to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their activities and programs. The written and the oral record were each given due recognition, personal testimony became a potent reminder of struggle and pain, and works of art not only celebrated the survival of Indigenous cultures, but could also be recognised as visual records of country, of history and of Dreamings. Of course, the use of this range of material to express and interpret Aboriginal history came under fire even before the opening in 2001 and the basic premises of new ways of doing history came under vehement attack, as will be discussed in chapter six. If the museum is doing its job however, these public debates can be as transformative as they are frustrating, though the museum must be able to

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85 The Freedom Ride, in February 1965, was described by Professor Ann Curthoys, who was a participant, as when 'a group of uni students travelled around country towns in NSW protesting racial discrimination'. One of these students was Charles Perkins, later to become Head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and a prominent activist. See Curthoys, Ann, 2002, *The Freedom Ride: Its Significance Today*, a public lecture at the NMA, 4 September. See also Curthoys, Ann, 2002, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers*, Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin.
engage in the debate on equal terms with its interrogators, without interference designed to perpetrate seamless stories instead of diverse ones.

Essentially, the time from the opening of the National Gallery to the opening of the National Museum, charts a major shift in museological practices in relation to Indigenous cultures and histories. The dynamic of the acceptance and then celebration of Aboriginal art, paralleled with the early vision of the Pigott Report, laid the foundation for new developments in museum interpretations of Aboriginal history, and while much remains contested, there is a new willingness to engage with Indigenous life and to see it as an intrinsic part of Australian cultural identity.
Conversations and spectacles in the National Gallery of Australia

Museum scholars contrive the conditions in which they and the rest of us experience the objects in which we may be interested, and in which they instruct us to take an interest through their choices. Museum scholars determine our experience of much of the art we can know. The objects and their institutional setting constitute the museum scholar's medium.


This chapter will explore the activities and directions of the National Gallery of Australia in the period from the late 1980s to 2003: its acquisitions; its display of the permanent collection; its temporary and travelling exhibition choices; the sponsorship it has achieved; its corporate strategies; and its public profile. The history of these activities, considered separately and in concert, portrays several significant shifts in the gallery’s general management, as demonstrated through its curatorial and educational responsibilities and initiatives. These activities reveal the changing relationship between the NGA and the public sphere.
These shifts in policy as well as practice reflect the Gallery's response to a crucial question in contemporary museology: to what extent does art history provide the methodology for the operations of the contemporary public gallery, particularly in an increasingly corporatised and market-oriented milieu? We can approach this question in a descriptive manner by asking what have been the effects of art historical discourses and methods of investigation, of validation, and interpretation, upon the curatorial practice and educational outreach of the NGA? It will be argued that the exhibition program, and even the exhibition hangings, and the acquisitions history of the NGA have been driven by the obligation for art historical validation. The NGA addresses an audience that it imagines to be spectators to the historical theatre of art and the narratives of art history. What other kinds of audiences can be created for art?

This chapter will demonstrate that the rhetoric of the NGA retains a particular social program which predetermines its cultural communications, militating against its public statements in favour of new museological tasks.

Collecting

The climactic resting place of all art practice is still the official museum. The museum space provides a venue or terrain where those authorities of tradition, of history, of location, of maker, of collection, display, spectacle, naming, talking and writing come into high relief.

Craig Judd, 2000, 'Framing the museum: the evolution of the museum as an encoded site of interpretation and display', Opening address, Focus Fest, Biennale of Sydney

When James Mollison resigned the Directorship of the National Gallery to become Director of the National Gallery of Victoria in October 1989, he left a collection that had been developed (and displayed) largely according to the principle of 'masterpieces', highpoints in both the conventional history of art and in an individual artist's oeuvre. Given the difficulty of, and the desire for purchasing important works of western international art, it was not surprising that
this part of the collection remained, in art historical terms, undeveloped or token in its coverage.

The Australian collections were ostensibly much more coherent. Under Senior Curator Daniel Thomas' leadership (and previously visiting Curator James Gleeson), Australian art was developed 'as an integrated collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints and decorative arts.' In the installation of the collection the intention was to present a more 'complete' picture of Australian art and culture by incorporating diverse media, including decorative arts, creating an interconnectedness between the 'fine' and more practical arts and to thus produce a wider understanding of Australian visual culture - what Thomas called 'cultural unity'. This technique was more predominant in the colonial section of the permanent collection and actually served to cover the collection's weakness or 'unevenness', that is gaps, in colonial paintings. Andrew Sayers, a curator in Australian art at the Gallery, then Assistant Director, Collections, from 1985 to 1998, declared, while acknowledging that the installation masked many gaps, that only the Australian galleries 'could claim some sense of chronological coherence and art historical sweep.' Of course this implies that there was a bigger story of Australian art and culture that the collection was attempting to illustrate and that, for it to be complete, filling in the gaps would be an ongoing aim.

Additionally, the 'display' collection was supplemented by what was termed the 'study/storage' collection. According to current Head of Australian Art, Anne Gray, this was a response to the recognition of 'a national responsibility to form research collections, particularly works on paper that may not be displayed and certainly not displayed all at once...[meant] to enhance the understanding of

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2 Referred to as 'unevenness' in Sayers, Andrew 2003, in, 'No Mere Container: The collection display in the National Gallery of Australia', in Building the Collection, Green, Pauline (ed.), NGA, p. 120.
3 ibid., p. 119.
Australian art in all its complexity and to show the evolution of major artists within that narrative. The narrative remained the centre of collecting practices.

Meanwhile, the so-called 'new art history', which began to take hold in Australian art institutions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, allowed an expansion of the canon of the art museum. University and art school curricula in art history and what was now called art theory expanded to include new philosophies of art. Professional conferences, frequently attended by museum staff, such as the Art Museums Association of Australia’s Annual Conferences or the talks and conferences linked to major contemporary exhibitions such as The Biennale of Sydney, no longer simply heard papers on, say, the iconology of an image, but embraced topics such as women and power, or western culture and the 'other'. Critical writing on art also reflected these trends. The narrative of Australian art, in response to these changing attitudes, was being enlarged in the Gallery's Australian collections by the incorporation of art by Indigenous artists, women, and migrants. The expanded subject matter and media chosen by contemporary artists represented new social, political and philosophical perspectives.

5 Art theory is a term that describes a shift since the late 1970s towards the inclusion of semiotics, cultural theory, feminist critiques and critical studies from across the humanities. Thus art theory includes not only art history but also studies of the art world and its professional practices, identity politics, critiques of art's institutions and the history, context and politics of visual interpretation. For a useful discussion of art theory see Holly, Michael Ann, 1997, 'Art Theory' The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism, on-line at www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/free/art_theory.html [Accessed: 4.10.2005].
6 Biennales were considered essential for curators to visit and participate in the linked discussions. For example, the catalogue of the 1986 Biennale of Sydney (called Origins Originality and Beyond) held at the Art Gallery of NSW provides an indication of the range of interests now being addressed in the art museum. Essays included 'Answering the Question: What is the Post-Modern?' by Jean-François Lyotard, and 'On the manner of addressing clouds' by Thomas McEvilley, which was a call to rewrite the history of art. The 1984 Biennale of Sydney (titled Private Symbol: Social Metaphor) included an essay on the mythologising of Latin-American identity — Nelly Richard, 'Latin America: Cultures of Repetition or Cultures of Difference?' and the 1991 Australian Perspecta (also at the Art Gallery of NSW) included a component on the previously 'culturally isolated' (in whose terms?) western suburbs of Sydney (an attempt at 'decentralising') with an essay by Jennifer Barrett headed 'De/tour to the Centre'.
Consequently, art history no longer apparently concerned itself simply with aesthetics, connoisseurship and iconology. For example, artists explored ideas as diverse as the relationship between the museum and art, feminism, psychoanalysis, ethnocentrism, semiotics and social history, and the museum sought to represent these new interests. New political consciousness sought to acknowledge Australia's changing place in an increasingly globalised world.

Around the time of Mollison's departure, the Gallery Council revised the Acquisitions Policy to 'place increased emphasis on Australian (particularly multicultural Australian), Aboriginal and Asian art'. In particular, it decided to 'increase the emphasis on Asian art, for which an inadequate and somewhat unbalanced provision had hitherto been made'. The new Director, Betty Churcher, appointed in 1990, was previously Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia and a graduate of both art school and London's Courtauld Institute. Churcher oversaw the revised policy directions.

The new areas of emphasis identified in the Policy were, firstly, Australian art in all media, including decorative and applied arts and including Aboriginal art - now part of Australian art rather than a separate and isolated category. Significantly, it declared that 'the acquisitions policy thus challenges any assumption that artistic achievement is to be found exclusively in the so-called “fine arts” of painting and sculpture, and asserts that it may be found equally in a

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8 Art museums attempted to meet this challenge by including more women artists, more artists from various ethnic and non-English-speaking backgrounds, and by incorporating more diverse styles of art.


11 Betty Churcher was Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia from 1987 (the first woman director of a state gallery), and had previously lectured and then become Dean of the School of Art and Design at Melbourne's Phillip Institute of Technology. She was educated at the Royal College of Art in London and at the Courtauld Institute in London, where she completed a Master of Arts in art history.

12 1994, National Gallery of Australia Acquisitions Policy, NGA, p. 5.
poster, a snapshot, or an embroidered cushion cover.\textsuperscript{13} Secondly, there was a new focus on ‘art of the Asia-Pacific region – particularly the art of Australia’s neighbours in Southeast Asia and in the Pacific regions of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia – not just geographic proximity, but also shared cultural experience contoured by the conflict and interaction of indigenous and settler cultures, giving rise to independent post-colonial cultures which harbour and celebrate both traditions.\textsuperscript{14} This description no longer refers just to the aesthetics of high art traditions but now contains a reflexive concern with the conditions of production of those cultures, in particular through the cross-cultural experience of settlers and Indigenous peoples. This suggested more than just a new inclusiveness in collecting, but also a new approach to exhibitions, though as seen in chapter three in the analysis of the \textit{Sari to Sarong} exhibition, this promise has remained relatively unexplored.

The third new emphasis was ‘East and West – reflecting the various cultural traditions that have formed and influenced Australian society through migration and cultural exchange, from the art of Aboriginal Australia to the art of Europe and America, and, increasingly, the art of Asia.\textsuperscript{15} This acknowledged the diverse character of Australian society, and reflected recent government policy promoting and celebrating multiculturalism.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{14} ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{15} ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Multiculturalism had been the subject of discussion since the 1960s and was part of government policy from the early 1980s. In 1989 the government of Bob Hawke formalised multiculturalism in a policy statement – ‘The National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia’. Multiculturalism as government policy has continued, most recently in ‘Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity’ (2003). For a full coverage of current and historical documents on multicultural policy see Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs at http://www.immi.gov.au/multicultural/australian/policy.htm [Accessed: 24.10. 2005] In 1985 Gough Whitlam reflected that ‘the Federal Government’s responsibility for migrants did not end with recruiting them…but extended into all the areas where my Government had taken initiatives, such as education and health and urban services’, Whitlam, Gough, 1985, \textit{The Whitlam Government}, Ringwood, Viking, p. 504. See also discussion in chapter three.
Finally, the policy included a recognition of the place of culture in Australian national identity, now clearly beginning to be seen as more complex and mobile. It declared ‘the situation of Australia as a predominantly European culture geographically located in the Asia-Pacific region provides the National Gallery with a unique opportunity to create, through its collections, a meeting of East and West. The acquisitions policy reflects the value that the National Gallery places on cultural diversity and regional awareness in the continuing development of Australia’s sense of identity’.17

The revised policy was published in 1994 and it is noteworthy that, whilst outlining the new areas of emphasis, the policy reaffirmed two primary tenets. Firstly that the Gallery ‘seeks to form a comprehensive collection of Australian art among outstanding works of art from other cultures around the world’ and secondly, that ‘the primary criterion for collecting is artistic excellence’.18 The idea of a collection being comprehensive entails both the strategy of collecting as much as possible around a particular subject and the methods for being able to tell narratives with it. The comprehensive collection thus requires a narrator. In the case of the museum the narrative is told by the curator, who establishes the range and type of stories that can be told. The narrative is always contingent on the available ‘evidence’ so in a sense the comprehensive collection can never be considered complete as long as new versions of the narrative arise. Artistic excellence is also determined by the curator, generally in line with the validating practices of the wider arts community, that is, the artists, dealers, art historians, critics and commentators who together determine what is valued at any given time.19 In other words, this validation is primarily the preserve of experts or

18 My emphasis. Ibid., p. 5.

footnote continues overleaf
specialists in the field who are capable of assessing a potential work against the accepted canons of art. These practices preserve the special knowledge of the art museum and can be an opaque rather than a transparent process to non-specialist visitors to museum displays.

Thus, while the Gallery acquisitions policy was enlarged to encompass new areas of interest, the changes were not designed to alter the basic premise of entry into the collection in the first place. The canon of art remained intact. In addition, the policy, with its various qualifications, still essentially allowed the collecting of almost everything, even from classical Greece and Rome.Referring to the Australian collection, the policy document declares that 'as well as being of merit aesthetically, [it] is intended to show how different generations have expressed their values, suggesting through a wide range of subjects and styles, various ways of interpreting our history. In other words, collecting is towards a multiplicity of values rather than towards a single aesthetic.' This statement appears contradictory. Whilst the collection is conceived to be capable of telling our history and of representing a multiplicity of values, one particular value is overriding – that of aesthetic merit (though this is not an immutable, fixed category, but one that can change with taste). The logical extension of this is that some stories are told, or 'framed', better than others. So one must ask the question, what gets left out? Indeed, one might ask if the multiplicity of stories are simply the subjects of the artists and not the museum itself. Does the museum's story remain essentially that of aesthetics and connoisseurship?

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21 There are many examples in art museums of works being deaccessioned on the basis of changing tastes and interests. For instance, in 1946 and 1947 the Art Gallery of New South Wales sold a number of works by women artists because they were not considered central to the collection, yet by the 1980s, with the impact of feminist art history, the status of these works was being reconsidered. Refer Philp, Angela, 1988, The Sydney Society of Women Painters 1910 — 1934, Master of Arts Honours Thesis, University of Sydney.
At the very heart of the art museum is the need to research and validate the object. When a work of art enters a museum it is first confirmed as an authentic object (an exercise of connoisseurship) — identified with an artist, style or period. It is documented with a registration number, measurements, artist or maker, medium, provenance (though it must be said that once the object reaches a place of display its own history as an object is usually omitted), detailed description, photographic record and the notation of any inscriptions. These details provide the basis for all ongoing research. The ‘knowledge’ in a work of art, particularly as determined by these methods of validation, is in a sense an old form of knowledge, outmoded by new formations which are created by establishing new relationships to ideas. Rather than the object in isolation, its relations to systems of power and social production are becoming a more significant part of the understanding of a work of art. In the museum narratives and interpretations attach, as a layer above, to the primary validation of the object itself. This is what makes scholarship in the museum different to that of the academy. Yet frequently museum scholars (such as curators, educators, conservators) lay claim to the nature of their research being the same as that of, say, a university. It differs significantly, however, in the use of the primary source - the physical object.

Nevertheless, many concerns are shared and the art museum draws on historical thinking in the broader scholarly field. For example, curator Anne Gray has considered the development of the NGA collection in retrospect and quotes Daniel Thomas saying that ‘we now see nineteenth-century Australia’s story as a

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[22] See Gaskell, Ivan, n.d., ‘Some Responsibilities of Art Museum Scholars’, at www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/bca/gaskell.pdf [Accessed: 1.8.2003], and 1993, ‘Redefining Historical Scholarship’, Report of the American Historical Association Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Scholarly Work, at www.historians.org/pubs/Free/RedefiningScholarship.htm [Accessed: 3.12.2005]. Dr. Jette Sandahl, Director of the National Museum of World Cultures in Gottenburg, Sweden, in referring to the NMA’s 2001 Negotiating Histories conference noted that the idea of ‘negotiating history’ is beyond conventional scholarship and ‘is a serious attempt to go behind or beyond the concept of the visitor or the audience as the public partner of a museum. It is trying to reach also a level of dialogue more direct and in many ways more profound than that of the guest book on the one hand and the ministry of culture on the other.’ [Sandahl, Jette, 2002, ‘Fluid Boundaries and False Dichotomies – Scholarship, Partnership and Representation in Museums’, Keynote paper at INTERCOM Conference Leadership in Museums: Are Our Core Values Shifting, Dublin, Ireland, October 16 – 19, p.6].
story of land-taking. Land filled with Aboriginal myth and spirituality, land formed by Aboriginal agricultural practice...a revised understanding of colonial art finds that it embodies our present-day hopes for Indigenous reconciliation, and our fears of ecological disaster."23 Gray, acknowledging there is no one right narrative, writes of complete revisions of Australian art, the importance of retelling its story and of discovering new aspects of familiar images. This expanded understanding of art historical tasks certainly opens the museum up to new interpretations of its collections. Curators have long since rejected the notion of the art museum providing a neutral frame for the pure enjoyment of art. Yet, the frame of the NGA collections is not only to be found in these retellings of our history, located in the contents and meanings of the works themselves. It is also found in the institutional practices of acquisition and display that independently create their own meanings. These, I maintain, remain more powerful than particular juxtapositions of works of art and associated texts to tell a new or revised story. Even though the meaning of a work of art is never immutable, art museum interpretations have an authority that tends to diminish the interpretations of other contexts, whether the home, the commercial gallery, public building or park, surrounded, as the art museum is, by expert art historical discourse.24 The art on the walls and in storage is part of a broader and complex discourse in which cultural legitimation and authority are at stake.

The revisions of the collection started to appear in modes of presentation as well as acquisitions. Annual Reports from the early 1990s began to place Aboriginal art reports first, followed by Asian and then Australian art, and finally International art — a subtle but potent reminder of the changes in emphasis. Aboriginal art was placed by Betty Churcher in a prominent position at the entry to the Galleries. Similarly, in 1991 the Gallery opened Nomura Court, a newly built mezzanine creating a gallery for Asian art, and funded by a donation from Nomura Securities, a Japanese financial services company. Its opening signalled a

period of greater focus on Asian art, including many new acquisitions. The Nomura Court opening, for example, was celebrated with the purchase of a Japanese sculpture of *Prince Shotoku praying to the Buddha*, c. 1300.\(^{25}\) This was followed in subsequent years by works as various as an eighteenth century Indian Mughal miniature, a nineteenth century painting from Rajasthan, and an extensive program of acquisitions of textiles from China, Laos, Cambodia and particularly Indonesia.\(^{26}\) The Tsui Collection of Chinese art (a group of twenty-eight works, mostly ceramics), was donated in 1994 - 95 by Dr. T.T. Tsui. The Gallery planned to create the Tsui Gallery of Chinese art to house it, proposing to make space available when the temporary exhibitions wing was finished, allowing for a permanent gallery of Chinese art.\(^{27}\)

In 1991 the Asian art department noted that ‘because we will not be able to cover all areas with our acquisitions, major loan exhibitions will obviously be crucial to ensure the continued maintenance of a balanced program.’\(^{28}\) Again the implication is that the desire for the development of the collection should ideally be to create a comprehensive coverage of the subject. The inability of the acquisitions program, for whatever reason (money, space, philosophy), was clearly seen as a deficiency. The ‘balance’ that was sought was not explained, but seems to suggest that this was indeed ‘obvious’ in terms of any understanding of conventional museum collecting practices. Interestingly, the Gallery has sought to be comprehensive in one area of Asian art – textiles, particularly from Indonesia. The collection is now world famous and places the Gallery strongly in the context of our Asian neighbours. Some contemporary Asian art, such as Japanese artist


Yukinori Yanagi's 1994 *Chrysanthemum Carpet,* was included in the International art department rather than the Asian art department. This seems a peculiarly museological division, perhaps reflecting a notion of a globalised modern or post-modern world, somehow separate from local or regional cultural concerns.

The Gallery Council declared 1994 as a year to celebrate Australian art. The Australian galleries were rehung and refurbished to include new rooms that effectively doubled the display area for colonial art — the area long felt to be inadequate in terms of the collection. The collection was enhanced by additional loans from the Rex Nan Kivell collection in the National Library and works from the National Museum. The rehang was the subject of much debate, including a conference organised by the Gallery called *On the Line: Re-Hanging Australian Art.* Four themes were investigated by many outside speakers and reflected the revisions of the hang. They were: Cultural Encounters; Landed - Writing on the Land; Shaping Lives — reflections on biography and autobiography; and Distorting Glasses — looking through art. The lives of artists and ways of looking were among the frames for display. Most significantly, cultural encounters concerned the new display of work by Aboriginal, Pacific and European artists now displayed together in the first gallery and at intervals thereafter. It attempted a new vision of Australian history through art — that of the meetings of strangers. Representations of the land were shown in conjunction with Aboriginal art and revealed more effectively how European ideas had shaped our vision of the land.

Acquisitions of Australian art during the early and mid 1990s ranged from extensive examples of prints, including posters made by social and political

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29 Yanagi's work, questioning contemporary Japan, is a sculpture, a 'carpet' made of wood and brass, that incorporates Japanese symbols — the chrysanthemum crest belonging to the Imperial family and the rising sun (hinomaru) from the Japanese flag.


31 ibid., p. 2.

32 ibid., p. 3.
collectives, to icons of Australian art. Streeton's *Golden Summer, Eaglemont*, 1889, was considered a highlight, as was the *Bath of Diana, Van Diemen's Land*, 1837, by John Glover. Works by Charles Conder, Conrad Martens, Louis Buvelot, Eugene Von Guerard, Frederick McCubbin, James Cant, Fred Williams, Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan, John Brack, James Gleeson, Roger Kemp, Robert Klippel, Keith Looby, John Olsen, Mike Parr and Rosalie Gascoigne were added to the collection, extending the representation of these well-known artists. These acquisitions were in keeping with the accepted pantheon of Australian art history. Nevertheless, extensive purchases of Aboriginal art were made which did offer a new outlook. These included the nineteenth century artist Tommy McCrae's sketchbook, urban art by artists such as Fiona Foley, Karen Casey, Julie Gough and Judy Watson, and contemporary bark paintings. Seven works by East Kimberley artist Rover Thomas were commissioned, depicting sites and events connected with massacres of Aboriginal people in his region.

International art acquisitions, whilst not extensive, added to the pantheon of modernism – works by Magritte, Matisse, Goncharova, Pissarro, Dali, Motherwell, Mucha and Picasso filled in gaps in the story of modern art. Other purchases included New Zealand artist Neil Dawson's 'Globe' (now destroyed by lightning) which was suspended between the Gallery and the High Court, significantly enabling viewers to look up to a clouded southern hemisphere. An unusual architectural item, Petitot's pair of grand vases (c. 1765-68) from the Palazzo Ducale in Palma, frame a gallery entrance off the main entry concourse, a somewhat isolated example of 18th century decorative arts that functions more as Gallery décor.

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33 This work was featured in the 1994 – 95 Annual Report and described as 'the highlight in the development of the Australian collection this year.' 1995, *National Gallery of Australia Annual Report 1994 – 95*, Canberra, NGA, pp. 8, 10, 11. It was described as 'a summer landscape in the slanting light of a late afternoon...the most famous of the Heidelberg pictures' and as 'an icon'. The report also says that 'in the terms of Streeton's day, it was a spontaneous and harmonious expression of a particular sentiment of place.'

When Dr. Brian Kennedy\textsuperscript{35} assumed the Gallery Directorship in October 1997, one of his first tasks was to review the development and use of the collections. In order to undertake this clearly he declared a moratorium on acquisitions which lasted until April 1998. He stated ‘in coming here and stopping gallery purchases for eight months — something I was advised to sort out — there was the perceived lack of a co-ordinated purchasing policy.’\textsuperscript{36} Whether this was his perception or that of the Gallery Council was unclear, but his moratorium was a decisive act. Responding to criticism of this decision, he continued, saying ‘there is a couple of things you can read into that. One, that I was critiquing my predecessor. I wasn’t. Two, that I was critiquing those curators who’d operated a different policy. I wasn’t. Three, that I was depriving all the art dealers who’d previously supplied works to the gallery...I am, I believe, to some people, dangerous. Dangerous, that is, in my artistic policy.’\textsuperscript{37} Kennedy was operating on the belief that purchasing needed to be brought under control, that too many works were being acquired, and that the collection needed greater focus.

Kennedy appeared to be moving the Gallery in radical new directions. Over time, as will be seen, he made some very strong statements indicating a desire for the Gallery to participate in the debates of the cultural public sphere and indicating a sympathy for at least some of the precepts of the new museology. The institution however, remained resistant to these efforts, and often it seemed as if Kennedy was engaged in a battle to balance new ideas with the power and influence of social and government elites and entrenched curatorial practices.

The outcome of his moratorium was a new \textit{Corporate Plan} for the years 1999–2001, subtitled \textit{Into the New Millenium}. It outlined a set of new and renewed priorities for the Gallery and squarely placed the collection in the context of its

\textsuperscript{35} Dr Brian Kennedy was previously Assistant Director of the National Gallery of Ireland. He was educated at University College, Dublin, studying art history and history, completing a BA, MA and PhD there.

\textsuperscript{36} Brian Kennedy quoted by Alan Ramsay, 2002, in “Schacht at but far from dead” in \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 19 April.

\textsuperscript{37} ibid.
audience. He declared that ‘the National Gallery of Australia is a social enterprise. We aim to confer social benefits on the community...[we] aim to serve the public by providing access to the collection of works of art and information about them. This is our core business.’38 Yet amongst the various priorities and strategies, including those necessary and expected aims of all museums to preserve and research the collections, were a number that reveal that the NGA remained essentially a fairly conventional art museum. These aims included to ‘build a collection of works of art of outstanding aesthetic quality’ and to ‘promote the artistic achievement of Australia.’39 These aims are, of course, what may be usually expected of any art museum, however they also serve as reminders of the emphasis on high culture and professional achievement which then imagines an audience for them, created through education and access. Thus the plan then included to ‘seek to achieve the widest audience possible by improving access to works of art and information about them’40 – an audience perhaps previously excluded, but now given opportunity and the means to understand the language of the Gallery. Similarly, the plan aimed to ‘provide a representative collection of the major individuals and movements in Australian and International art’ and to concentrate on ‘premium works of art.’41 The idea of a ‘representative collection’ is based on art historical assessment, and thus excludes ‘outsider’ art or those outside the mainstream art world. Yet two aims differed significantly. They were to ‘seek to contribute to the spirit and self-esteem of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians’42 and to ‘encourage public debate in the visual arts,’43 (which was coupled with supporting research and scholarship related to the Gallery’s collection). Contributing to spirit and self-esteem, particularly as it now included Indigenous Australians, was a new focus and an important

40 ibid.
acknowledgement of changes in Australian society, as was encouraging public debate, though what sort of debate this meant was not expanded upon. This 'social enterprise', albeit with a new focus on audience, was really no different to what art museums had been doing for decades. High aesthetic quality or 'premium' works of art and 'major individuals and movements' continue the priority of older art historical discourses. Thus in order to achieve the associated aims of encouraging public debate and contributing to spirit and self-esteem, the only way available seemed to be through an exposition of cultural high points and stylistic changes. Yet 'debate' involves more than one viewpoint. How is this possible in a collection selected by curators in a process that is not made public until each acquisition is complete? Brian Kennedy said that 'museums and galleries can be relationship facilitators providing interaction between an individual and an art medium.'44 The Gallery, however, conducts this relationship by acting as a translator or interpreter, rather than by revealing the processes by which art's value is determined or the fact that the Gallery is an active player in the art market (something that sets it apart from many other types of museums). Effectively then, the non-participation of citizens and visitors in the cultural public sphere represented by the Gallery creates what Habermas referred to as a 'democratic deficit.'45 The public were not made aware of alternatives or of debates about quality or significance. Once acquired, the work makes its way to the walls to participate in a narrative which has again been determined by curatorial staff. Perhaps the visitor may debate the aesthetic merits of individual works or the nature of the narrative created, but this is really a private exercise, simply taking place in a public environment. The visitor engages with objects and text, but rarely with curators. Labelling of works of art, whilst sometimes offering additional information beyond the conventional attributions, is rarely used to ask questions or present alternatives. The Corporate Plan, however, refers to 'public

debate' [my italics]. Perhaps the occasional forum, seminar or conference might have provided this public context, but these occasions were usually attended by a specialist audience who were already participants in the process of cultural validation. The power of the art museum as the keeper of knowledge is in an unequal relationship with the visitor, denying the possibility of the debate between equals in a democratic public sphere to which Habermas aspires. In reality, the only recourse for the general visitor is to accept the art historical frame, which limits the broader social and cultural understanding of works of art to those directly referenced by curatorial choices.

One place where public debate has taken place however, is in the Senate Estimates hearings of federal parliament. Here the Gallery has been repeatedly questioned over issues of collecting, building environmental conditions and staffing issues, but while these discussions are in the public domain, they represent bureaucratic and ‘system’ world interests on behalf of a broadly identified public. These debates result in strategic and prescriptive action rather than shared understanding and agreement as an outcome of ethical discourse. They are debates in which the power relationship is fixed and non-negotiable and the Gallery (not the public) is forced to explain or defend itself.

In aiming to ‘confer social benefits on the community’ (notably conferring, in the sense of an act of largesse), Brian Kennedy ultimately interpreted this as the uplifting effects of great art, and admitted that in revisiting the Acquisitions Policy ‘we wanted to regain the Gallery’s vision of the years 1973 to 1975. It had been simply brilliant – aiming to establish a great collection of works of art in

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46 For example, the Hansard transcript of the Senate Estimates Committee discussion on 10 February 2000 reveals concerted questioning over departures of staff as well as a particularly heated discussion about Dr. Kennedy’s cancellation of the Sensation exhibition. Official Committee, Hansard, Senate, Environment, Communication, Information Technology and the Arts, 2000, Consideration of Additional Estimates, Thurs 10 February, pp. 183 – 209. See discussion later in this chapter.

Canberra.48 His brief, identified in the Corporate Plan, included ‘to instigate a thorough review of all existing collection areas, to determine the quality and authenticity of the objects in them.’49 This emphasis was reinforced in the Plan by the provision that the works of emerging artists would be exhibited but not necessarily purchased – at once reasserting career hierarchies for artists and taking a safe and retrospective approach to purchasing. At the same time, a reformation of the Gallery’s Foundation, specifically established to raise funds for acquisitions or encourage donations, assisted with revenue-raising and allowed for major purchases, with the aim that ideally half the funds should come from private sources.50 High points were Kennedy’s aim, promoting spiritual reverence in front of great works,51 even if buying ‘premium’ works meant buying fewer but more expensive works. But great works are only a part of cultural expression.

Kennedy often referred to his desire to see world art with Australia in it, rather than Australian art in the art world,52 perhaps suggesting a continuing provincialism in Australian cultural attitudes. He maintained that Australian art is little known internationally (did this suggest it needed international approbation to validate it?), hence his choice of ‘premium’ works with the ability to attract audiences to the Gallery. Sometimes these have been referred to as ‘destination’v' works. These destination works are mostly of international origin (perhaps with

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48 Brian Kennedy, Press Club Address, HowsitGoin! Three years at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 14 June 2000.
52 Brian Kennedy has often referred to this desire in his public statements. For example, in a speech at the National Conference Dinner of the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia, 5 December, 2002. These speeches are all published on the NGA website.
53 ‘Destination’ work is a term first used by journalists when discussing NGA acquisitions and since occasionally referred to by Brian Kennedy as a term he does not like.
the exception of the Aboriginal Memorial and Nolan’s *Ned Kelly* series of paintings). The implicit message about the status of Australian art is obvious.

Kennedy was criticised for some of his purchases on both artistic and financial grounds. David Hockney’s *A Bigger Grand Canyon* was described by cultural commentator Humphrey McQueen as having ‘all the charm of a lime and purple carpet from a 1960s leagues club.’ McQueen’s point was that the NGA should be seeking the great works of the future, rather than lesser works by already famous artists. Similarly, in an interview with ABC radio’s Michael Cathcart, in which the journalist referred to Lucian Freud’s *After Cézanne* as a ‘depressing and fleshy sort of painting’, Kennedy commented on the idea of ‘destination’ works.

He said ‘there’s no doubt about it, that the way to make a gallery I think, well known in terms of the public and receiving a lot of visitation, is to buy works of art which cost an awful lot of money. I suppose if they’re very big and they’re by artists who are famous, that adds to it as well.’ Kennedy explained that this was the means used to get people into the building, that this participation in the hype over big purchases was justified, and that the hype eventually dissipates as works take their place in the collection. The hype, he said, is because ‘we have to validate that purchase’ and ‘validate our curatorial taste.’

By 2001 the revised Gallery vision, in a new *Strategic Plan (2001 – 2004)*, was to ‘meet the cultural needs of the Australian people as their national art gallery’. These cultural needs were not identified, but the goals for the collection as expressed in 1999 remained largely the same — acquire premium works of art, strengthen and refine the national collection, and maintain and protect the national collection. In promoting access to the visual arts, an expanded strategy was now expressed as to ‘stimulate discussion and debate on art, art museums

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56 ibid, no pagination.
and issues relating to the visual arts. While activities such as symposia, lectures and seminars provided sites for debate, the acquisition of works of art continued to base itself on aesthetic value or on the ability of a work to fit into an art historical narrative. Brian Kennedy expressed it himself: '...in an art gallery a collection is made based primarily on the aesthetic value of works of art. In a museum the primary values are most often social and historical...an art gallery, therefore, is a celebration of public taste at given moments.' These values, of judgement and taste, of premium works of art, of art historical discourse, and the audience they address, are also revealed in the National Gallery’s exhibiting practices. What statements does the Gallery’s exhibitions program make to its audience, and how?

Exhibiting

The elements of museography (art history) are highly coded rhetorical tropes that actively 'read', compose and allegorize the past (rather than simply reflect a pre-existing past)...Exhibition (museology) and art-historical practice (museography) are each a genre of composition and narration and as such, can only constitute the 'realities' of history through the use of prefabricated materials and vocabularies — tropes, syntactic formulas, methodologies, principles of design, and the techniques of stagecraft and dramaturgy ...Both museology and museography are discursive arts which coyly erase all traces of their labor. Donald Preziosi “Museology and museography” in The Art Bulletin, Vol. 77, March 1995, p. 14

As Donald Preziosi points out, an exhibition is a composition, a creation — it creates a history while employing many devices to obscure the fact that it is a creation. An exhibition is not just a collection of linked objects on public display. It is a discourse, a set of interpretations. An illusion of truth is created by an

58 ibid, no pagination.
59 Kennedy, Brian, 2002, op.cit.
exhibitionary discourse. The discourse in turn makes statements about art, but these are not truths, simply interpretations. When the National Gallery of Australia presents an exhibition it makes a statement about its own interpretations of art – not in the sense of an analysis of a particular set of images or objects, but in the sense of its authority to determine what is valued at any given time.

There are many types of exhibitions in art museums. They can vary from vast historical surveys, to small focus shows, retrospectives of single artists or presentations of particular themes in art. Some may attract only small numbers of visitors, but overwhelmingly art museums now need to attract new and larger audiences. The desire to create a more democratic environment, representing and incorporating greater diversity, and a willingness to participate in civil society, have all fostered the will to seek new audiences. At the same time, the budgets of museums have sometimes been shrinking and museums have been encouraged to take on a more business-like style of management. Western liberal democratic governments, including Australia’s, influenced by economic rationalism, have demanded more entrepreneurial activity in government agencies, including museums. The desire to make these institutions partly financially independent (the argument of ‘user-pays’ against ‘the public good’) has fostered new ways of at least seeming to make an effort to ‘pay one’s way’. The National Gallery charged for entry to the Gallery until 1998 (and there appeared to have been a rise in visitors after entry charges were dropped – see Appendix C), and continues to charge entry fees to special temporary exhibitions. No longer could curators in

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60 Discussions of different types or approaches to exhibitions can be found in the collection of essays edited by Greenberg, Reesa, Ferguson, Bruce W, and Nairne, Sandy, 1996, Thinking About Exhibitions, London, Routledge. For instance, Debora Meijers identifies a new form of exhibition which she calls 'ahistorical' which abandons the traditional chronological arrangement and the classification of materials so that it is possible 'to connect a fifteenth century chair with a female portrait by Picasso and an installation by Joseph Beuys.' (p. 8).

61 See here the philosophy evident in the DASSETT discussion paper What Price Heritage? discussed in chapter two.

62 In 2003 the NGA also dropped the concessional entry fee to major exhibitions for visitors under sixteen. General entry fees have now been dropped at many museums around Australia, including the new Melbourne Museum and the National Museum of Australia.
large institutions produce many exhibitions with limited appeal. It became necessary to get more people in to the museum, to find ways to add to the funding mix, and even to contribute to the economic spin-offs of cultural tourism. Thus, the phenomenon of the ‘blockbuster’, that has dominated art museums the world over for at least the past two decades, has become a permanent fixture, including in the NGA (and the NMA).

A large-scale loan exhibition with the ability to attract huge crowds, a blockbuster usually charges a reasonably substantial entry fee, similar to or slightly more than a cinema ticket. Available for only a limited period, like a theatre production or a rock concert, it can (if ‘successful’) take on the urgency of a spectacle that must not be missed, often requiring people to queue for entry. The phenomenon has been criticised for sometimes being too populist (or unscholarly) or even for packaging art into chocolate-box style, easily palatable moments. They are usually presented with elements of stagecraft (as are all Gallery exhibitions) – specially coloured walls, whether recreating the white cube, or dramatising with intense colour; dramatic lighting often creating jewel-like effects over an image; works are placed, or composed, to create moments of rest and highpoints, like the job of a dramaturge or art director, to place visual stresses on ‘important’ works, often highlighted by audio-guide numbers; or to allow movement around works where crowds are anticipated to gather (indeed, crowd control). This is spectacle.

Additionally, such shows are invariably accompanied by exhibition shops marketing not only publications linked to the show, but also a wide range of products (often quite expensive) that act as souvenirs of one’s visit, like a tourist memento. The shop for The Queen’s Pictures at the NGA even sold antique

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64 *The Queen’s Pictures* was an exhibition of 30 paintings from the collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and was held from 24 February to 14 May, 1995. It attracted over 130,000 visitors. 'An entire gallery was transformed into an attractive and imaginative shop which carried...'
furniture, perhaps fostering the idea that acquiring the trappings could possibly emulate the lifestyle of the pictures' owner? Maybe there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, but it does remind us that these exhibitions are, in fact, marketing and commercial exercises. That is, they are not neutral expositions of art historical discourse (not that that ever was neutral), but are fully vested in a market-oriented culture.

The National Gallery has had its fair share of blockbusters. Although blockbusters were not unknown in James Mollison's time—the Gallery briefly had the *Entombed Warriors* on display in 1983, and followed this with about one a year afterwards, mostly collections from famous institutions around the world— they really took off during Betty Churcher's Directorship. Churcher entered the NGA during difficult economic times. The Government had begun to question the Gallery's large budgets and was now seeking greater revenue-raising from the Gallery's own operations. One of Churcher's responses was to generate major exhibitions. However, rather than importing them whole from elsewhere (though there was the occasional pre-packaged show), Churcher chose to use the collections and expertise of the Gallery, along with international loans, to create in-house or home-grown blockbusters. She particularly encouraged the development of special exhibitions that highlighted strengths of the permanent


66 See Appendix D.

67 Lionel Bowen, Chairman of the NGA Council, noted that 'like many other organizations, the Gallery was required to reduce expenditure in a number of areas as a consequence of prevailing economic conditions; and the general trend of reduced attendance at galleries and museums across the country impacted on our attendance and revenue earning capacity.' [1991, *National Gallery of Australia Annual Report 1990–91*, Canberra, NGA, p. 7].

68 Betty Churcher described the blockbuster as having a serious function—'as well as introducing a new audience to art galleries, the blockbuster provides opportunities for detailed art historical research, and collaboration between the world's best art museum professionals.' Churcher, Betty, 1995, 'Public Pictures' in *Sydney Papers*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Winter, p. 106.
collection by isolating particular works or groups of works and adding major international loans.

The first of these was *Rubens and the Italian Renaissance* (curated by David Jaffe), aimed at putting the Gallery's Rubens *Self-Portrait* in context. This was followed by *Surrealism: Revolution By Night* (curated by Michael Lloyd, along with Ted Gott and Christopher Chapman), which situated Australian work alongside art from Europe, highlighting examples of both which were owned by the Gallery. Sometimes the exhibitions were created to reveal influences on Australian artists even in the absence of those influential items in the collection – the Turner exhibition was one example, showing the source of inspiration for nineteenth century Australian landscape painters, particularly John Glover. Developed by the Gallery's own curatorial staff, these exhibitions invigorated art historical understandings of major works in the Gallery's collection. They encouraged in-house scholarship and instructive collaborations with curators and others in institutions around the world. 69

Looking back, Churcher noted that 'no gallery has a collection large and diverse enough to cover the full gamut of art history; it is the loan exhibition that can lay otherwise unavailable options before an eager audience, whether for study or pure enjoyment...[the] hope will always be that visitors to the exhibition will 'grasp the value' of what has been laid before them, and that some will put their discoveries to good use.'70 More than just a reference to the educational tasks of the Gallery or its collecting limitations, this statement entails a recognition of the 'value' of curatorial choices – as these are 'laid before them'. The audience indeed becomes a spectator to the art historical theatre. The exhibition, in spite of its scholarly or educational content, is ultimately spectacle – a re-rendering of the

69 Other loan exhibitions organised during Churcher's time (not all curated in-house) included: *The Age of Angkor: Textiles of Southeast Asia: Dressed to Kill: Masterpieces From the National Gallery of Ireland: The Queen's Pictures: Matisse: The Vision of Kings: Paris in the Late 19th Century: and Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact* (held in 1998, after Churcher's departure).
iconic status of particular images and objects, and once again the grand narrative of art history is superimposed on the telling of its complexities.

One exhibition during this period stands apart however. It is *Don't Leave me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*, curated by Ted Gott in 1994, and funded by the Commonwealth AIDS Education Program. Rather than an art historical survey, the exhibition portrayed both people living with (and dying from) AIDS and its social and political effects. Paintings, objects and installations were accompanied by the AIDS quilt, posters, T-shirts and photographs of people living with the virus. A frank and potent mix of statements about sexuality, death, medicine, humiliation and pain, it played a key role in exploring the issues around HIV/AIDS and operated as a kind of cultural activism. A confronting show, it nevertheless attracted huge audiences, particularly in the under-forty age groups, those usually in the lower range of gallery attendance figures. What this exhibition proved was that art history does not always have to be the centre of an art museum's focus, but that it is possible for an art museum to engage with contemporary issues, as is often found in contemporary social history museums. In Australia, this type of art exhibition is, however, more frequently found in small, artist-run or independent contemporary art spaces.

Contemporary museology often pays lip service to the idea of art museums as 'safe places for unsafe ideas'. Perhaps this failure to engage with 'unsafe ideas' is partly due to the recent conservative trends of Australian political life (it is, after all, governments who still provide the majority of funding for art museums, especially in the case of the NGA). As will be seen later, there was a suggestion of political interference in the dropping of the *Sensation* exhibition at the NGA in

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71 The exhibition was accompanied by a book compiled by Ted Gott, 1994, *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*. Canberra, National Gallery of Australia.

72 The Annual Report for 1994/95 noted that *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS* 'attracted the interest of age groups which otherwise rarely attend the Gallery.' ‘Almost 70 per cent of visitors were aged under 40 years and 30 per cent of all visitors were new.’ 1995, op.cit., p. 25. There were 130,000 visitors to the exhibition, ibid. p. 30.
1999. But it is also arguable that art museum professionals still have difficulty with significant disruptions of conventional art historical discourse. Every activity of the museum is so focussed on the primacy of the object (registration, authentication, cataloguing, conservation, storage etc) that this inevitably remains the primary narrative in exhibitions as well as in collecting. The typical 'blockbuster', particularly in the NGA, continued to focus on the masterpiece or high point and its art historical context.

Temporary exhibitions soon became an essential part of the gallery economy in the 1990s and, according to Andrew Sayers, 'the coherence of the collection display was frequently compromised'.

(Again, the idea of compromise is not just about removing items from permanent display to make room for others, but affecting its capacity to tell a 'coherent' story.) Hence Churcher sought funds for a new exhibitions wing which opened, after her departure, in late 1998, with the exhibition developed under her leadership: *Esso Presents New Worlds From Old: 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes.* A major shift is evident even in the title of this show. 'Esso Presents...' precedes the descriptive title. There could be no better indicator that the major exhibition had now become a marketing tool not only for the Gallery, but also for its sponsors. I will return to this issue below.

Meanwhile, in September 1998, Brian Kennedy had taken up his post and delivered the new Corporate Plan. This plan declared the need for a 'balanced' exhibitions program which would target local, national and international audiences. The type of 'balance' required was not identified, but certainly implies a previous imbalance in Gallery programming. A peculiarity was the aim to both focus and diversify the exhibitions program. Kennedy immediately disbanded the exhibitions committee and put proposed exhibitions on hold. He arranged for the permanent collections to be rehung, creating four groups – Australian,
Aboriginal, Asian and International - the division between Aboriginal and Australian, a seemingly strange apartheid, but perhaps reflecting a political will to celebrate Aboriginal art as a unique force?

A new Partnership Program was established in order to get more of the collection on display by offering loans to Partner galleries and museums around Australia. This was to be supplemented by the existing Travelling Exhibitions Program which was increased to expand access to the collections, including sending exhibitions overseas. For instance, an exhibition of Contemporary Aboriginal Art was sent to St Petersburg in Russia, drawing an audience of around 500,000 people.

To ‘deconstruct’ the collecting process or habits of the Gallery at a time of major revision, an exhibition Wall to Wall: Collections and Collecting at the National Gallery of Australia was installed in October 1998. Reminding visitors that only a small percentage of a collection is ever on show at one time, it was declared to be an examination of ‘the variety of works that the National Gallery of Australia collects and the ways that they are displayed.’ The exhibition, proposed by Brian Kennedy, included five ‘treasure rooms’: work from the Max Ernst Collection, displaying the artist as collector; selections from the Philip Morris Collection purchased under the aegis of a major sponsor, representing corporate patronage; the work of Arthur Boyd as an example of a major artist collected in depth; works collected to represent an art movement – here Pop art; and decorator taste – everything was red, chosen to ‘match the lounge suite’. Additionally, crates and solander boxes (for storing works on paper) were taken out at advertised times by curators and conservators to show the extent of the collections of works on

paper and various transport, packing and conservation techniques. While this was not a 'blockbuster' in the usual sense and did not have an entry fee, it was certainly a major exhibition in the nature of its claims for the Gallery. By exposing the processes of the art museum, it made the institution itself the subject of the show. By making the ways in which art is acquired and interpreted in a museum more transparent, it provided an opportunity for debate about the Gallery itself. An educational tour de force, it could be said, along with Kennedy's public statements about the role of art museums, to have created an expectation of what was to come under the new leadership of the Gallery — perhaps a period of reflective thought about changing roles for cultural institutions?

However, in the rush of decisions and changes being made under the new Director, these kinds of statements proposing fresh critical revisions soon seemed inconsequential. Blockbuster exhibitions, with a view to continuing to attempt to increase attendance levels, were, said Kennedy, going to be increased from perhaps one a year to maybe three or four a year.78 Kennedy sought out major packaged or externally curated exhibitions, including The Italians: Three Centuries of Italian Art (put together by a private company, Art Exhibitions Australia); Monet and Japan (curated by Emeritus Professor Virginia Spate, a Monet expert, and Gary Hickey, the Gallery's curator of Japanese art); An Impressionist Legacy, Monet to Moore: The Millennium Gift of Sara Lee Corporation; The Book of Kells and the Art of Illumination; Shell Presents Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact; Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism: The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection; Chihuly: Masterworks in Glass; Paint and Print; and William Robinson — A Retrospective (from Queensland Art Gallery).79 None of these presented any particular surprises as far

as new visions of art are concerned, and it must be said that, rather than reflecting considered choices, such packaged exhibitions were usually ‘purchased’ from the marketplace of international touring exhibitions which are largely developed for generic audiences rather than specifically Australian ones.\(^{80}\) In that market environment, they generally need to be ‘safe’ in order to ensure their market viability. As a result, fewer major exhibitions were curated in-house and there were suggestions of curatorial discontent in the Gallery.\(^{81}\)

Of course, there is always an exception to such conditions and the National Gallery had a notable example of an exhibition with troubled relations to the marketplace. This was the exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection*, which the NGA had booked for its advance program in 2000 and then subsequently cancelled it in 1999. *Sensation* was a touring exhibition of 40 works by contemporary British artists in the collection of advertising executive Charles Saatchi. The exhibition was sponsored by Christie’s Auction House. It included work by Damien Hirst – a sheep and a shark in formaldehyde, and a rotting cow’s head with maggots. Marc Quinn contributed a bust called *Self* which was made with nine pints of his own blood. Chris Ofili’s work was a collage of a black Virgin Mary covered with elephant dung. Another work was a huge painting by Marcus Harvey of child murderer Myra Hindley in which each black and white pixel included a child’s hand print. First shown in 1997 at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, the exhibition had travelled in 1999 to the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA) in New York. Here there were protests about the nature of the work.

\(^{80}\) There are touring agencies who specialise in coordinating exhibition networks and tours, and often museums will offer an exhibition they have developed to other institutions around the globe, sometimes to recoup the costs of developing and staging the show.

\(^{81}\) For example, McDonald, John, 2001, ‘When image is given priority over images’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February – McDonald wrote that ‘there is considerably less opportunity for curators to initiate strong, scholarly projects of their own. This is an issue in terms of the NGA’s vaunted “leadership” ambitions, and in respect to the job satisfaction of curators who see themselves essentially as art historians. Under current arrangements, too many curators are working as clerks and office drones, with little chance to develop the projects that are dear to their hearts and their sense of self.’ Similarly, McDonald also noted of Kennedy that he probably needs to redefine his relationships with his staff... [Transcript, McDonald, John, 2000, interview by Alison Caldwell (comper), ‘Problems continue to plague National Gallery’, *The World Today*, ABC Radio National, September 28.}
which included an artist-protester throwing horse manure at the museum because Ofili's work was, he said, 'Catholic bashing', and a 72 year old man who smeared white paint on the Ofili work. Protests in London, when the exhibition was at the Royal Academy, did not have the same dramatic results as those in the USA, as we shall see.

In New York a court case was brought by the BMA against the City, whose Mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, had threatened to cut off museum funding, cancel the museum's lease (which it had held for over 100 years) and evict it from the premises. The BMA won the case (though there are still other counter suits pending) on the basis that its First Amendment Rights had been violated, the judge declaring that 'the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.'

Following the troubles in New York, Brian Kennedy decided to cancel the show at the NGA. Minister for the Arts, Richard Alston, had received numerous complaints about the show coming to Canberra, prompting him to request a copy of the catalogue. Although a Minister is not able to give directives to the Gallery, they can express an opinion. Kennedy denied that there was any political agenda influencing his decision, but it seems he did consult the Minister before making his decision. At the time he was accused of trying to divert attention from the decision by strongly promoting his purchase of Hockney's painting *A Bigger

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83 The Hansard Record for the Senate Estimates Committee on 10 February 2000 shows that Senator Schacht asked Dr Kennedy some very probing questions about his consulting the Minister. Senator Schacht said: 'It is the same as debates on the censorship on films and books et cetera. I do not believe that politicians should wander around and be overstepping the mark of those who are appointed because of their expertise. I suggest that is what you are doing. But Senator Alston did make some informal comment — not in writing. You specifically asked him whether he had any objection. That is asking him to make an editorial comment about the artistic merit of the exhibition. I do not think it is the role of a minister in any party to be given the last drop when you have a dedicated board appointed for their expertise and responsible to the minister and the parliament. In the end, the last thing you want is any minister, Labor or Liberal, being the artistic director of the National Gallery of Australia.' Official Committee, Hansard, Senate, Environment, Communication, Information Technology and the Arts, 2000, 

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footnote continues overleaf
Nevertheless he was forced to issue a press release which stated: 'as a publicly funded institution, the Gallery will not proceed with a show which has been the centre of a furore in New York over issues which have obscured discussion of the artistic merit of the work of art.' He claimed that the Gallery could not host a collection of art that was so closely linked to the commercial market and that directly advanced the private commercial interests of Charles Saatchi (and Christie's). Yet this had not been a problem when the Sara Lee Corporation was directly involved in the touring exhibition *An Impressionist Legacy* (essentially collected by one business man, Nathan Cummings), nor when Esso sponsored the *New Worlds From Old* show. Was this different because it was morally difficult? Being contemporary art, it was harder for the Gallery to distance itself from the views expressed by the artists. It could not rely on the fallback of ‘disinterested’ art historical scholarship, and perhaps there was also the fear of government cuts to funding. The rhetoric of wanting to engage with public debate in the visual arts did not seem to apply in this case.

Kennedy acknowledged a wish to open up the Gallery to new modes of activity and interpretation, to the needs of civil society and to making the Gallery a place for both spiritual reflection and public debate. Yet the recent practices of the NGA suggest a very different discourse, that of a much more conservative and singularly market-oriented style of art museum. In what other ways is this being communicated?

Consideration of Additional Estimates, Thurs 10 February, p. 197.


85 In the Qantas Birthday Lecture at the Gallery in 1997 (titled ‘The National Gallery: Temple and Forum’) Kennedy said: ‘The truth is that we can have the art temple, acknowledging its virtues, but we must also have the forum...The National Gallery of Australia must be a contemplative forum and an active agent for the vital role of the visual arts in society. The National Gallery is a call to the assertion of meaning in a world of much meaninglessness’, p. 12, unpublished manuscript.
Communicating:

I live in the world of art and my job is to mediate between works of art and their viewers. This is a delicate role, which when over-exercised gets in the way. Such mediation should be relatively seamless, so that the provision of access to works of art, and to information about them, occurs in the most seductive manner...There is no art in art galleries. There are only works of art.

Brian Kennedy, Speech to Foundation Dinner, 10 May 2003.

The suggestion that there is no art (artifice?) in art galleries seems quite disingenuous. Kennedy's statement that mediation should be seamless and occurs in a seductive manner already announces its own complicity in the artifice. How is this artifice conducted in the Gallery?

In 1992 Betty Churcher made a then unpopular decision to change the name of the Gallery, from the Australian National Gallery to the National Gallery of Australia. This, she says, was ‘to bring us in line with “like” institutions overseas – in other words, to become by name as well as by deed, a National Gallery.' Why was it important to share the same syntax as other similar institutions? Did it serve to re-emphasise the word ‘national’, making it the very first statement that the Gallery makes about itself, before one even enters either the building or engages with its external programs. This nomenclature defines more than just the need to provide services across the whole of Australia and to the Australian people. It was apparently intended to reinforce associations with federal government, with nationalism, and with an accompanying assertion of pride and good reputation. Cultural achievement is syntactically equated with national standing. This is measured not only internally, within national borders, but also externally, in parallel with allies, neighbours, market partners and others. Nationalism thus becomes a measure of progress, a factor of modernity. This name change, for Churcher, served to reassert an Australian nationalism, and
continues to inform most of the activities of the Gallery. Additionally, the
continued use of the term 'gallery' rather than 'museum' (as discussed in an earlier
chapter) defines the NGA firmly in terms of its focus on art, rather than on its
museological functions.

The NGA is embedded in a narrative by its very name as well as by its discursive
practices. The modern idea of progress, of linearity, while questioned by cultural
historians and many curators alike, is reaffirmed in every 'national' frame. Even
many of the physical spaces of the NGA, including the linear installation of art on
the walls, promote an equally linear, progressive movement through chronological, stylistic or thematic shifts. This contains the agency of the visitor
to certain predetermined paths, both physically and intellectually.

Yet the visitor still brings his/her own agenda, their own experiences and
feelings. These are harnessed by the Gallery to encourage conformity to a range
of acceptable behaviours and responses. Low or targeted lighting (acting as more
than just a feature of conservation) tends to quieten and slow visitors, particularly
as they progress into the smaller and more intimate spaces of the building. (It is
noticeable that the NMA is a much noisier environment that the NGA.87)

Entering the portals of the building, you leave the grand open symbolic spaces of
the Parliamentary Triangle and undergo a transition through the high ceilings and
massive walls of the ground floor (where, like the outdoors you have just left) you
encounter the icons of the NGA. It is only then that the visitor experiences the
objects that declare themselves less overtly, aware, however subconsciously, that
their status is different. The Aboriginal Memorial, the location of which has altered
several times, currently greets visitors as their first art encounter in the building. It
makes a powerful statement about the place of Indigenous culture in NGA
thinking, and makes a claim for social and political concerns beyond the

86 Churcher, Betty, 2003, "The Years 1990 to 1997" in Building the Collection, Green, Pauline
institution. The bulk of Australian art however is to be found upstairs, largely in smaller, less imposing spaces.

This location has been the subject of much debate over the twenty-one years of the Gallery’s existence. Mollison declared the upstairs galleries to be a more conducive physical environment for the scale of most Australian art. Alternatively, Churcher, soon after her arrival, moved a large proportion of Aboriginal art downstairs – a statement of new priorities and values. However, most Australian art remains on the upper floors to this day.88 In the country’s ‘national’ art museum Australian and international visitors encounter Indigenous and international art as they enter, and have to purposefully seek out the rest of the nation’s artistic heritage. Brian Kennedy countered those who saw this as a problem with the rejoinder that, as noted earlier, he wanted to see ‘the world with Australia in it’ not the other way around. We saw this in his major purchases, that could be identified both by the large amounts of money they cost and the level of PR that attended their purchase - they were almost invariably international. The important purchase, in collaboration with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, of John Glover’s *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town From Kangaroo Point*, of 1831 – 33, was a rare example of a work not overshadowed in publicity by international purchases like the sixteenth century Cologne school triptych or Pierre Bonnard’s *Woman in Front of a Mirror*.89 The ‘destination’ work does more than encourage the curious, it creates a hierarchy of cultural values through icons.

Kennedy enthusiastically embraced the use of ‘icons’. In 2003, following the 2002 celebration of the Gallery’s twentieth birthday, the NGA toured an exhibition called *20 Icons to 20 Venues*. In this case the ‘icons’ were selected by receiving venues from a list of 20 works, three of which were Australian (Nolan’s *Ned Kelly* series, and Von Guerard’s *Mount Kosciusko* and *Ferntree Gully* paintings). In the

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88 This is being reconsidered by the new Director, Ron Radford.
89 Part of the attention given to the Glover painting, however, was due to a storm about whether the two purchasing institutions had colluded for financial advantage, an issue taken up at the footnote continues overleaf
One of the major issues that the NGA has been concerned with for many years is that of accessibility. Efforts to increase access to the collections and activities of the NGA have had several motives. One is, of course, a desire to be a part of civil society and the public sphere and to thus offer some of the cultural assets of that society to as broad an audience as possible.\textsuperscript{90} Equally significant has been the need to justify government financial support by ensuring that Gallery services are available to increasingly larger numbers of Australians. Cultural institutions are invariably forced to play a numbers game — economic rationalist governments define success in terms of measurable achievements and find it difficult to assess qualitative achievement. The NGA regularly reports on visitor numbers and surveys visitors for demographic data and for levels of satisfaction (in measurable scales).\textsuperscript{91} Visitor numbers also impact upon the Gallery's revenue-raising capacity, through ticket sales to events and special exhibitions, sales of publications and merchandise. The ongoing exercise of expanding audiences has changed the habits of the NGA substantially. What it is now charged with communicating to the public are opportunities not only for formal and informal education, but also entertainment, social activities and acquisition of the social or cultural cachet associated with a major cultural institution.

\textsuperscript{90} See Kennedy, Brian, 1997, Qantas Birthday Lecture 1997, 'The National Gallery: Temple and Forum', unpublished manuscript, p.p. 7, 12, 13; Kennedy, Brian, 2002, 'The purpose of a National Gallery', speech delivered at Wellington City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, 23 February, in which he cited Elaine Heumann Gurian's description of a museum as a 'safe place for unsafe ideas' and referred to the Gallery as 'a social enterprise or a public good'; and NGA, n.d., Strategic Plan 2001 — 2004, Canberra, which stated one of the goals of the NGA was to 'stimulate discussion and debate on art, art museums and issues relating to the visual arts.' [Goal 5, no pagination].

\textsuperscript{91} For examples of visitor numbers see Appendix C.
As noted, general Gallery admission fees were abolished in 1998 when Brian Kennedy successfully convinced the government that fees were inhibiting growth in attendance figures. Fees for special exhibitions remain, on the basis that they incur significant extra costs and are occasions for individual choice, while upholding a philosophy that access to the permanent collection should be free for all Australians. Members' programs promote 'brand' loyalty, and social events and other activities foster repeat visitation as well as offering enriched experiences. Concerts, movies, lectures, artist talks, exhibition openings (which now ask for payment in order to be on the invitation list), celebrity chats, excursions and behind-the-scenes tours create a venue for social interaction and education. Schools and tour groups are given targetted programs and exhibitions are created for special needs groups, for example, children or the disabled.

In the early 1990s the education department of the gallery was briefly renamed 'Education and Cultural Action', invoking an activist profile, though its product remained within the ambit of the events listed above. Later efforts were made to reach beyond general expectations for art museum activities. Education staff, in 1998, organised a one day event titled Sub-urban to attract audiences in the 15 – 25 year age group, traditionally not regular gallery-goers. 3,000 young people spent the day hearing local bands, watching break-dancers and other dance groups, seeing demonstrations of extreme sports, visiting a Youth Art exhibition, entering a graffiti art competition, seeing short animated films by tertiary students and a viewing a fashion show mounted by technical college students. This festival aimed to make the Gallery a more active, rather than a passive space, allowing young people to have positive associations with a national cultural site. In other words, to make the Gallery 'cool'. 92 This too was a form of branding.

In Churcher’s time, the ‘brand’ of the Gallery was ‘national’, ‘blockbuster’ and sometimes ‘scholarly’, emphasising the ability to focus on and enhance the collections, through major exhibitions and acquisitions, and to foster the Gallery’s national profile. Ostensibly the ‘national’ brand continues, with inflections of pilgrimage. Iconic works promote an aura around the Gallery. Following the German theorist Walter Benjamin’s influential discussion of the loss of aura in an infinitely reproducible art environment, the NGA asserts that it maintains the unique existence and unreproducible experience of the original. Benjamin considered that when art is mechanically reproduced it loses its original uniqueness and basis in ritual and comes to be based on politics, or what Benjamin called its exhibition value. This meant, for Benjamin, that reactions to works of art then become predetermined by the mass audience response. While Benjamin celebrated the liberation of art from what he called ritual he also recognised that the original allowed a space for contemplation unavailable elsewhere. Similarly, I argue, the creation of an aura around an institution functions as a political act, rather than an aesthetic one. It is an exercise in publicity, in creating a market, a brand identity.

Kennedy referred, in a speech to business leaders, to the Gallery’s activities as establishing a ‘brand’. Obviously wanting to appeal to a business sensibility, he nevertheless made it quite clear that, in line with international trends, the Gallery is a business enterprise as much as a cultural one, though measuring its success in qualitative ways. This was perhaps an appeal to a desire to focus on qualitative measures, rather than the political reality of numbers. In its relations with government the NGA is forced to use quantitative measures to make its case for continued support. Qualifying his comments by calling the Gallery a ‘special kind

94 ibid.
of business, a social enterprise, he went on to outline the similarity of the NGA's objectives with those of other types of Australian business. He asserted that 'a successful business is one that feels that it is part of the community, and sees itself as both sustaining and interacting with the community. We need to create the conditions for business success, by stimulating creativity, and by promoting access to the creative practice of our best artists.' The analogy may best express an attitude to an enterprise more than its actual conduct, but it highlights the new relationships that the Gallery pursues and fosters (by necessity).

Sponsorships are among these new relationships and have become integral to the Gallery's operations, supporting acquisitions programs, special events, and exhibitions. Exhibition titles actually incorporating the sponsor's name, such as *Esso Presents New Worlds From Old* (in 1998) and *An Impressionist Legacy – Monet to Moore: the Sara Lee Millenium Gift* (1999) appear to be less ethically troublesome than in earlier years. Sponsors previously had their names and logos reasonably discreetly displayed on posters, banners and in publications, but never foregrounded the exhibition itself. When the name appears in the title of a show however there seems to be a doubled branding occurring – of the Gallery by the sponsor and the sponsor by the Gallery. Kennedy says of business sponsorship that 'the arts benefit staff development in businesses...and business can invest in the community through the arts.' These are worthy ambitions, but the reality is far more prosaic. Each needs the other for far more simple reasons – business can look more civic-minded while using NGA occasions to lobby government or interest groups while the Gallery simply needs the cash (or donations of works of art).

Meanwhile Gallery merchandising is a huge branding exercise as well. No longer simply selling catalogues, postcards and reproductions of collection items, the

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96 ibid.
97 ibid.
98 ibid.
Gallery (as does the NMA) now has logo-labelled clothing, tableware, jigsaw puzzles, stationary, embroidery kits, trinkets and toys, as well as associated product by brands that fit the NGA image. These items can be purchased in the Gallery Shop, special exhibition stores, on-line and by mail order. They earn revenue for the Gallery by tapping into consumer desires for brand identities. As they reach further into new markets the items themselves become advertisements for the NGA.

The Gallery has also become a chic site for venue hire (as has the NMA). Weddings, receptions, product launches, and many other private functions can now hire spaces like the foyer, restaurants, seminar and lecture rooms, and Members' Lounge, using its quality facilities and benefitting from its sophisticated image. This earns money from using spaces otherwise unoccupied (especially after-hours) and also brings more people into the building who are potential return visitors. Moreover, the Gallery is a social enterprise in more ways than Brian Kennedy meant when he stated his vision for it.

Like the NMA, new technologies have been used to increase outreach – in late 1998 the Gallery launched its website, which now provides information about Gallery programs and services, as well as documenting a large proportion of the collection on-line. Touch screens were installed in the foyer to enable access to collection and other information, and new multilingual versions of audio-guides were produced. The website now includes copies of policy and planning documents, in an effort to be open and accessible in management. However, when *The Australian* newspaper tried to obtain documents concerning the tenure of curator John MacDonald, under FOI, they were blocked until legal action resolved the matter in their favour. The website enables visitors to it to request information, but it is otherwise not interactive.
Reproductions of the Director's statements, press releases and speeches were intended to provide a focus for debate, but it is hard to see where this debate could take place in the absence of a two-way forum for it. Kennedy's rhetoric remained isolated from action. Unlike the National Museum's efforts to create opportunities for debate, the NGA has not fostered an active program for public discussion on the moral and ethical issues raised by artistic production, nor has it engaged in any systematic exchange of ideas with its publics. While it is true that the Gallery has long had a commitment to conducting conferences on issues of importance in the arts, these remain debates about the canon of art and are for more specialist audiences. They have not functioned as public debates. A true exchange of ideas, for Habermas, cannot take place in an environment corrupted by consumerism in the form, for example, of branding and sponsorship. In the Qantas Birthday Lecture in 1997, entitled The National Gallery: Temple and Forum Kennedy argued that two ideas of an art museum were necessary. Jestingly calling himself a 'secular archbishop', he maintained that the 'open dialogue' and 'exchange of ideas' represented by the art museum as forum should be balanced with the art museum as temple, a place for 'thoughtful reflection, patience and detailed observation.' He declared that 'works of art do not change. It is we the viewers who change in relation to the work of art. They demand detailed attention. They are vulnerable and are easily disturbed by change of circumstances.' It could also be argued that the works do change, as we change our ways of looking at them, that there is not an immutable art to be retrieved by someone (an expert?). If works of art, as Kennedy avers, are vulnerable to changes of circumstance and thus of interpretation, then perhaps they are just as much at risk from the business enterprise of the Gallery, as they might be from any debate surrounding them.

99 Discussion with Brian Kennedy, 8.8.03, by Angela Philp.
101 ibid.
In 2004 Dr. Kennedy decided to resign as Director and has since taken up a post in the United States. The new Director, Ron Radford, took up his position in early 2005. It will be interesting to see how Gallery policy may shift in the future.

Conclusion

The NGA has adapted many of its practices in response to the critiques of the new art history. These adaptations have expanded the canons of art history in the Gallery, admitting new sources and forms of art into the collection and exhibitions, but have not essentially disrupted the methodology of art historical validation, which remains dependent on connoisseurship and the conventional narratives of art history. Yet Brian Kennedy described the Gallery as a forum as well as a place for quiet contemplation, though this was not matched by efforts to achieve an environment for public debate. This brings us back to Kennedy's earlier description of his role as that of 'mediator', to be undertaken in a 'seamless' manner. If a process of education or spiritual enlightenment is to be seamless, then it must use an invisible narrative. Dialogue, as implied in the model of a forum, can hardly occur in such an environment. Or at least, it can only be dialogue about dogma, about the 'spirituality' of art\textsuperscript{102} or new interpretations of the existing canons of the art museum. It cannot attempt to shift those canons or to offer alternatives, for this would be a form of heresy. The NGA's cultural statements, despite its rhetoric, remain firmly within the canons of the art museum as first established by the Enlightenment project.

\textsuperscript{102} Kennedy's term, see Qantas Birthday Lecture 1997, op. cit. — 'Materialism has far from vanished but there is a palpable spiritual craving in society, and the gallery has a significant role to play in sustaining and uplifting that spirit.'
Battlefields of Culture and Games of Truth: ‘history wars’ in the National Museum of Australia

Debates about the nature of historical practice and competing philosophies about the role of museums, especially national institutions, have surrounded the opening years of the new National Museum of Australia. In this chapter I will look at the effect of new histories and new approaches to museology in the NMA and the ensuing debates that resulted in a Review of the Museum and, currently, an uncertain future for it.

The history that we, as a society, create and remember, also creates the frame for our politics – both in terms of everyday engagements and formal governmental activities. Any idea of the nation that is presented in any national cultural institution is part of a game with very high stakes. As I have previously noted, scholars like Benedict Anderson have called the political nation ‘an imagined
community' in which a self-image can be invented by a people to create a sense of oneness and homogeneity in the context of modernity and progress.1

Liberal democracies, with their projections of civil society, have tended in the past to seek reassuring histories which reaffirm the nation's strengths and unity—providing a nation with stories that suggest its people share more similarities than differences, like the Australian idea of the Gallipoli hero—a resilient and independent character that supposedly typifies the Australian people. Critical histories can be perplexing because they appear to dissipate certainties and call into question the underpinnings of national beliefs and understandings. In fact, foundation narratives have been important tools in providing a vision of a nation—its national character. However many of these founding narratives have been exploded by new histories in the past thirty or so years.

Critiques of official political history or academic history have prompted moves to more inclusive histories. These have incorporated studies of Indigenous history and politics, women, migrants, the subaltern, labour history and the lives of ordinary Australians as opposed to the famous. These have, naturally, given rise to debates about truth and interpretation. Theorists, like Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, have questioned national metaphors of social cohesion as they obscure conflicts and diversity and promote the power of the privileged middle class.2 It could be argued that the nation state is an outdated model for thinking about identity. Certainly the boundaries of the contemporary nation are eroding with the impact of globalisation—in transnational markets, migration, communications and the exchange of ideas. One response to this has been to reassert local/regional identities and interests. The museum is an important participant in this expression of identity. The role of a national museum may

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well be to imagine the nation, not just what it has been in the past, but what it might become.

The original impetus for the National Museum has a long history, and was highlighted as an integral feature of a new capital in Walter Burley Griffin’s designs for Canberra in 1913. However, as has been stated in chapter one, 1975 was the pivotal year, when the Pigott Report from a Whitlam Government inquiry into Museums and National Collections in Australia, was published. When the NMA opened in March 2001 its vision of Australia reflected not only that Report but also the many changes in museum philosophies that had begun to take hold across the museum profession in the 1980s. Reiterating the proposal of the Pigott Report, the NMA itself declares that it ‘acknowledges that frameworks of knowledge and interpretation are constructed within social settings. This requires a willingness to present contingent and conflicting views as well as a recognition that the Museum may arouse a controversy.’ Needless to say, controversy did arise.

In 2000, prior to the opening of the NMA, Museum Council Member David Barnett criticized the museum for its approach to history, picking out what he found objectionable in exhibition labels and generally denouncing the tone and intellectual content of the museum. Barnett had been appointed to the Museum Council in 1999. A journalist, former Press Secretary to Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, and the official biographer of Liberal Prime Minister John Howard, he was described at the time as ‘far-right’. He was also the author of

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5 In 2000 Barnett wrote a letter to Tony Staley, Chairman of the NMA Council detailing his objections to exhibitions. These objections included the inclusion of entertainers such as The Wiggles and union activists in displays, and he objected to an exhibit on the Stolen Generations as a ‘victim episode’.” Cited in Macintyre, Stuart and Clark, Anna, 2003, The History Wars, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, pp. 191 – 193.
many articles critical of the so-called ‘Aboriginal industry.’ There was a fuss in
the media at the time, with accusations that the appointment was a sinecure. These
accusations were also pointed at Tony Staley, Chair of the Council, appointed in 1999, and an ex-Minister in the Fraser Liberal Government, as well as at Christopher Pearson who was also appointed to Council in 1999. An arts commentator from Adelaide, Pearson was a former speechwriter for John Howard. It was perceived that these appointments implied a regulatory role on behalf of the current Government’s interests.

Barnett delivered his objections in a five-page memo to Tony Staley, Chair of the NMA Council. He wrote that:

the Museum should not be a contributor to the reworking of Australian history into political correctness, which, as we saw at the [Olympic] Games opening ceremony, is taking hold...

Clearly, the symbolism of ceremonial occasions was important to Barnett, and this symbolism translated into the role of the Museum. He continued:

I would have thought a national museum in the national capital might have managed interesting exhibits dealing with the founding fathers and telling us who past prime ministers have been and something about them without being egregious. I am still working my way through

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8 Cassidy, Frank, 1999, ‘Museum Job Goes to Ex-Minister Staley’, Canberra Times, 24 September. Cassidy cites Senator John Faulkner criticizing the appointment of Tony Staley as Chairman of the NMA Council as ‘jobs for the boys...[and] follows on the heels of the appointment of prime ministerial biographer David Barnett...The National Museum Board seems to be a repository for Liberal Party museum pieces’.
these labels but I have read enough of them to be able to predict that we are heading for trouble.\textsuperscript{10}

Graeme Davison, Professor of History at Monash University, was asked by Tony Staley to review Barnett's comments. His response was that the overwhelming majority of labels were correct and based on sound scholarship and that 'balance was achieved across the whole museum, not at the level of every individual exhibit', saying that 'if every label has to be acceptable to every visitor then the result will be a very bland museum.'\textsuperscript{11}

The \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} reported that Barnett also took issue with the museum's statement of aims, saying that he felt they 'sanctioned the pursuit of personal agendas' and were, in Barnett's words, a 'gateway for political activism...surely the role of the museum is [to] present history, not to debate it.' He was quoted as saying that 'it is not the role of the National Museum to function as an advocate for causes, no matter how worthwhile they might be judged to be by the fashion of the day. The museum is a national body, not a collection of opinions. It should not constitute an opportunity for well-meaning individuals to establish their political credentials with their peers, or for interest groups to advance their causes.'\textsuperscript{12} Barnett's call for an uncontroversial history in the museum, such as dealing with 'founding fathers' and 'prime ministers' is, of course, as political as the practices he rejects. His would be a history of omission rather than inclusion. Davison has gone on record as believing that Barnett's concerns clearly revealed his ideological preferences and that the Howard Government was bent on historical revisionism,\textsuperscript{13} meaning in this case that the 'facts' of history might be reassessed on the basis of political expediency or to suit a particular philosophy. Davison was reported to say that 'what was at stake

\textsuperscript{10} Joyce Morgan, 2001, 'Howard's man: "These people are not my heroes" ', \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 6 June. Morgan obtained the notes through FOI; and Macintyre and Clark, op. cit., p. 193
\textsuperscript{11} Cited in Macintyre, and Clark, 2003, op. cit., p. 193.
\textsuperscript{12} ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Davison, Graeme, 2002, 'Exhibiting a revisionist view of our history' in \textit{Age}, 12 December, p. 17.
was whether the museum was free to follow a pluralist approach to interpretation' and that it was 'absolutely non-negotiable' that the museum encourage debate and not avoid controversial issues. 'On that issue, and to their great credit, the Council was not prepared to buckle.'14

Director, Dawn Casey, consistently responded to the critics by talking up the mission and vision of the museum, reminding people that there was a range of perspectives incorporated into museum exhibitions. When accused of having too great an emphasis on Indigenous culture she responded by saying that:

they [Indigenous peoples] deserve special consideration now because of the disadvantage they suffer on every objective measurement – whether it's health or education.15

Citing the many complaints, she replied that

the world’s newest museums...take a...many-stranded approach to national history. They entertain, as well as inform. Well, we are one of those. We accept that there are few absolute truths in history. We admit many voices to the debate. We use many media to tell the stories...If people find material in our exhibitions which startles or disturbs them, and they should, if they are paying attention, it becomes something to take away and think over. Discuss, perhaps reject, perhaps even take on board as part of a broader perspective.16

14 Morgan, op.cit.
A clearer statement of the new museology would be hard to find. Casey was forced to defend the principles of the new museum and to explain the new approach it was taking to national identity and history. The scathing criticisms of journalists such as in the tabloid *The Daily Telegraph* added fuel to the debates about the nature and role of history and museums. 

Miranda Devine declared that ‘...the underlying message of the National Museum of Australia...is one of sneering ridicule for white Australia. It is as if non-Aboriginal culture is a joke, all upside-down Hills Hoists and tongue-in-cheek Victa lawn mowers. The museum is supposed to reflect the national identity...the whole museum is a lie.’ Her invective revealed a wish for a museum of heroes and highpoints. She accused the Museum of reducing the entire Anzac tradition to a statue of a Digger and complained that the Second World War only got the same amount of space as the Vietnam War and Save the Franklin River protests. The fact that a duplication of what the Australian War Memorial in the same city already covers extensively might be unnecessary was ignored. She wanted icons of nation-building and when she did not find them, she declared the whole to be nothing but a left-wing takeover. Rather than analysing why things were treated differently to her expectations, new approaches to history were rejected out of hand. The museum challenged, rather than provided comforting familiarity. Unfortunately, Devine’s remarks, in a tabloid newspaper, fell right into the purview of Government rhetoric, which has claimed that middle Australia is being duped by ‘political correctness’. It may be time to reflect on whether the

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17 Media comment varied from supportive to condemnatory and made the subject of the museum a popular topic in newspapers and magazines for several months around the opening in March 2001. For example, Michael Fitzgerald said that 'where museums can often be solemn monuments to nationhood, the NMA is an open book [2001, *Time*, 12 March, p. 56f]; Tony Stephens called 'a wonderfully democratic museum' [2001, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 March]; while Piers Akerman called it a 'monument to horrendous political correctness' [2001, *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 April]. Significantly, many of these reports included discussion about the role of a museum in the twenty-first century.


19 Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, 2003, give an account of the recent uses of ‘political correctness’ in *The History Wars*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, pp. 133 – 136. See also Howard, John, 1996, *The Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture*, 5 July, in which he declared ‘we are not a Government beholden to political correctness.’ There is a useful footnote continues overleaf
shifts of belief and increase in tolerance in Australia in the past two or three decades have been as significant or deep-rooted as was once thought. They certainly appear to be under challenge.

The media have played a big part in the backlash against ‘political correctness’ in Australia in recent years. This is a subject worthy of some dissection and, though it is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that the media, including television current affairs, talk-back radio and newspaper polemic, are rarely held up to the rigorous standards of evidence that they in turn demand of historians and museums. In fact, they frequently serve as defenders of ‘the people’ against perceived moral offences to them and the nation. So when Miranda Devine says ‘Australia’s culture has been trivialised by the tone of exhibits at the new National Museum of Australia’ and describes ‘the lack of recognition of white Australia’s history, culture and achievements,’ she merely appeals to unquestioned paradigms of national pride rather than engaging with what is really at issue – the right to interpret and debate history and why it matters. Certainly what emerges is a sense of reaction to and rejection of perceptions of elite intellectual debates, debates which had hitherto not been seen as including ordinary Australians. In this case then, the National Museum’s commitment to public debate, to engaging ordinary Australians, should be seen as an attempt to take issues beyond apparently elite intellectual circles and open them up to a broader forum. The media’s participation, however reductive, becomes an important adjunct to debates within the Museum and brings them into a larger public sphere. However, given that the control and ownership of mainstream media are in the hands of a few conglomerates, their own interests over-ride those of free communication, and the media, like the museum, remains beholden to the interests of commerce (their advertisers) and sometimes to


government (which has some regulatory power, as well as being a source of news).  

On another front, the architecture of the new museum also produced very strong reactions, often negative. A tangled knot is a central element in the design and is said by the architects to suggest the weaving of many strands in Australian culture. However, many felt that the complexity of the building was excessive, that it was a ‘conceit’ and pretentious in its fragmented symbolism. Architectural commentator Peter Ward, for example, called it ‘an imagineer’s architecture in the Disney sense’ and a ‘postmodern folly’, concluding that ‘in so comprehensively confusing issues, identities, motives and morality, it trivializes our own, Australian, attempts to understand ourselves’. Furthermore, the storm about the building took on an international dimension when the architects, Raggett and Associates, were accused of plagiarising part of the design from the zigzag of the new Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by Daniel Liebeskind. The zigzag in the NMA, incidentally, can only be identified from an aerial perspective (see photo next page). The architects essentially responded that there were many ‘quotations’ in post-modern architecture. However much was made of the fact that the zigzag seemed to imply there was a parallel between the Jewish Holocaust and the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia. This only served to fuel the debates about the treatment of Aboriginal histories inside the building, raising the spectre of what has been termed in the

21 See the discussion of censorship and propaganda and the influence of the media in chapter eight of McGuigan, Jim, 1996, Culture and the Public Sphere, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 154 – 175.
media, and by John Howard himself 'black armband' history.\textsuperscript{24} Political debates about Aboriginal children being taken from their families were, and still are, open wounds, and even the building itself brought these issues into greater focus.

While an analysis of the building is really a topic in itself, it should be noted that, at the very least, the exterior effectively declared the institution 'unlike' traditional museums, indeed, post-modern, and so assisted in expressing the idea of a whole new approach to Australia and its history. On the other hand, the footprint of the building, due to its move from Yarramundi Reach to Acton Peninsula, was so reduced from the original recommendations of the Pigott Report (now one tenth its size) that it resulted in radical compromise over exhibitions, reducing their capacity to meet their original aims.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} This was a term coined by historian Geoffrey Blainey. See Blainey, G, 1993, 'Drawing Up a Balance', \textit{Quadrant}, Vol. 37, Nos. 7 – 8, July/August, pp. 10 – 15.

\textsuperscript{25} There is a range of documents held in the Research Library of the National Museum which outline the original exhibition briefs and proposals, as well as the original plans for the building. For example, Raymond O. Harrison, Museum Consultant, \textit{The Museum of Australia: Canberra ACT: A Preliminary Institutional and Facility Analysis Report # 1}, Volume 2, 25 September 1985; Construction Coordination Committee, \textit{Stage Two Briefing Kit}, Design Competition, \textit{footnote continues overleaf}
Criticism eventually exploded into what have been termed the museum's own 'history wars'. The Museum had presented a view of history that was vigorously contested. It had publicly brought aspects of Aboriginal history into focus, that had, in recent years, been part of what anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner called 'the great Australian silence.' These more unpalatable stories that were rarely, if ever, referred to, included those about violence on the frontier between Aboriginals and white settlers. The fact that Aboriginal people had even fought back to keep their land was conveniently forgotten. Official history had proven itself to be highly selective. With its reliance on written archives, the facts recorded were frequently only those of white men. Largely excluded from these histories were stories of massacres and other forms of violence. Oral traditions in Aboriginal communities have kept these stories alive. The Museum has included oral testimonies in its displays and given a voice to those previously hidden from history. For most academic historians in 2001, these ideas had been discussed, and presumably settled, in the preceding three decades.

The NMA, in its employment of multiple histories and diverse experiences, was attempting to acknowledge contemporary scholarship in history, especially exposing the fact that the practice of history has moral implications. A


26 Stanner, W.E.H., 1968, After the Dreaming. The Boyer Lectures, ABC.

27 The Museum has identified the formal and informal collaborations on research and scholarship that went into the development of these exhibitions in 2003, Submission by the National Museum of Australia to National Museum of Australia Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs, Canberra, NMA, pp. 57 – 60. See also pp. 15 – 25 on the nature of history and the development of the permanent exhibitions and p. 33 on research into Australia's history.


museum's representations of history can potentially clash with individual experience, memory and expectations. This does not just occur in the disputes of intellectual discourses, but when individual expectations are not met in the museum environment. Historian Susan Crane has identified a public resistance to historians which she says demonstrates that 'while historical scholarship is dedicated to the production of knowledge for a larger public, publics continue to harbor and develop their own collective memories which justifiably resist historical re-interpretation and which form an active component of public life'.

Public resistance is also often influenced by the media, which, in seeking a good story, can often amplify and sustain a controversy. Just as Graeme Davison identified the historical revisionism of the Howard government, so historian Pamela Walker Laird has noted that 'rhetoric about "revision", like that about "political correctness"", helps some critics build barriers against public openness to academic stories. Using this rhetoric, the critics position themselves as protectors of the citizenry against the intelligentsia...[and] labeling participants in any debate as enemies of the public will poison that debate.'

Until 2001, historian Keith Windschuttle had a fairly low profile. However, his contestations of the use of oral histories in the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia were picked up by the media, sensing a battle over interpretation and a sequel to Barnett's complaints, telegraphing it into a major public debate. Windschuttle's

33 Keith Windschuttle is a journalist, polemicist and historian who publishes regularly in Quadrant, Sydney. After a career in journalism, he lectured in Australian history, journalism and social policy at various universities in Sydney. He wrote The Killing of History: How Literary Critics are Murdering Our Past (Macleay Press, Sydney, 1994) and The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen's Land 1803 – 1847 (Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002). He has been the publisher of Macleay Press, Sydney since 1994.
argument was essentially that there was little or no proof about the numbers of people killed in these events. He questioned the use of oral history, declaring stories of widespread massacres to be ‘myth’ and that Australian historians had made errors of fact, or indeed had exaggerated or concocted their claims. In late 2001 his attack concerned the whole basis of the museum. He declared that ‘the museum is already a museum piece itself -- an expensive relic of postmodern theory. Apart from a few of the indigenous displays, it is not a real museum at all. It is a repository of nothing more than the intellectual poverty of the tertiary-educated middle class of the post-Vietnam War era.’

One of the particular displays that Windschuttle took objection to was Contested Frontiers in the First Australians Gallery. This display focused on struggles over land, identifying various sites of conflict and violence. It included a range of devices to tell the story, including European and Aboriginal weapons (rifles and revolvers, spears and woomeras), text panels, photographs, a multimedia unit that showed on a map of Australia where violent incidents had taken place, and a work of art, a sculpture, by Indigenous artist Fiona Foley entitled Annihilation of the Blacks, a work which clearly delivered an emotional response to the historical narrative. Here he found an example to prove his point. The display included material about an alleged massacre at Bells Falls, New South Wales, in 1820. This material drew on Wiradjiri oral tradition which told of violence at the time, written sources identifying that there was violence in the region around 1820, and a photograph showing the site and suggesting that Aboriginal people were forced off the cliff there. Historian Stephen Foster, previously General Manager, Content Development and Technology, in the NMA, noted that the suggestion of the manner of the deaths (not the fact that deaths did occur at some time in this district) was purely speculation and opened a path for Windschuttle to...

attack all the oral testimony in *First Australians*, and thereby enabled him to reject
the Indigenous voice. The museum immediately removed the speculative
material from the display, but this was not enough for Windschuttle. At first,
academic historians, such as Henry Reynolds, whose historical accuracy
Windschuttle had also attacked, did not pay him much attention, but as the
debate was picked up in the media, they were forced to confront the issues head
on.

In early 2002 the Museum and a number of historians and anthropologists
organised a two-day public forum at the Museum to discuss the whole issue.
Titled *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, it brought together opposing
sides. Attendees included Aboriginal people themselves, a range of leading
historians, members of the public, and Windschuttle (who attended only one
day). The event set out to resolve or at least air some of the historical
arguments at issue. A final panel session was broadcast on ABC Radio
National's *Big Idea* program the following January. Subsequently, the discussions
have been published as a book by the Museum. Similarly, as already noted in
chapter three, the disputes were outlined and opened up for questioning and
assessment by students and others, on the NMA website. In an open manner,
and in the spirit of Habermas's call for communicative action in the public
sphere, the Museum has never attempted to silence its critics, as in this debate,
but has allowed them a voice within the Museum. Given the overwhelming

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35 Foster, Stephen, 2003, ‘Authority on the Precipice: Multiple Voices and Visitor Responses at
the National Museum,’ in Fusions, Australian National University, unpublished conference
paper, p. 4.

36 Historians of Aboriginal history included Henry Reynolds whose book *The Other Side of the
Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (1982, Ringwood,
Hammondsworth, Penguin) had addressed the Indigenous experience of conflict and violence on
the frontier; Rhys Jones (for example, 1974, *Aboriginal Tribes of Tasmania: their terrain,
environmental controls, distribution, limits and proper names*, Australian National University
Press, Canberra); and Lyndall Ryan (for example, 1996, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd edition,
Allen & Unwin).

37 Speakers included Geoffrey Bolton, Graeme Davison, Tom Griffiths, John Maynard, Margo
Neale (curator of the First Australians Gallery), Christopher Pearson, David Roberts, Tim
Rowse, Lyndall Ryan, Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle. Historians Bain Attwood and
Stephen Foster were the organisers of the event.

strength of Aboriginal and academic arguments on the issues of Aboriginal history, it was most appropriate to address this in a forum rather than to allow the inclusion of critics in the exhibition itself. In this instance, it would have given undue weight to the strengths of the critics' arguments. Windschuttle blamed what he saw as the belittling of non-Indigenous history on the tenets of the new museology, but rather than addressing his philosophical differences, chose to dispute details of historical evidence.

As James Gore has noted in his 2002 PhD thesis, 'the greater awareness of indigenous people within the history and identity of ... Australia...has led to some insecurity over non-indigenous people's own place and role in society'. Thus, he said, claims that the emphasis in museum displays on Aboriginal history and culture 'has created an imbalance between indigenous and non-indigenous representations...has led to a perception among some critics that the role of the non-indigenous majority is being marginalised or ignored in the identity of the nation.'

This perceived insecurity has been taken on by what has been called the historical revisionism of the Howard government and impacted directly on the Museum. Historian Bain Attwood described Windschuttle's attacks as a desire to destroy postmodern scholars 'whose "relativism", he believes, threatens to undermine the order and certainty symbolised by European culture, democracy and the rule of law.' Attwood pointed to the fact that Windschuttle's rejection of the stories of Aboriginal dispossession made him lose sight of (and thus repudiate) the terrible situation of Aboriginal people. He noted that Windschuttle's 'irrationally bellicose writings have acquired purchase in Australia today, at least among those whom he has called "dead white males" — ageing, disgruntled and resentful Anglo-Australians who in the age of uncertainty also see themselves as an endangered species and similarly

lash out against the demons of multi-culturalism, Aboriginality and the like.'41

These attitudes seemed to have crystallised in some of the responses to the National Museum and the Museum, having already strongly established the importance of Indigenous cultures and experience in its exhibitions, was forced to defend itself.

Evidently the NMA, in producing a history that created uncertainties and exposed more unpalatable episodes of our past, had broken what might be called a taboo. National institutions were expected, at least in some circles, such as government, to be celebratory and unifying, rather than distinguishing complex motivations and competing interests in our history. In a sense, in the ‘old’ museology, it was expected that the knowledge presented in the museum was absolute, that the museum was a symbol of certainty and achievement. To break down this certainty was taboo, and this is exactly what the NMA set out to do. In fact, the new museology has made the taboo a subject of the museum, as part of new critical approaches to history. Caleb Williams, a curator at the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, has identified a number of useful theoretical models to account for the emergence of the taboo as a subject in the contemporary museum. Among these he included a model of an emancipatory impulse in museums. This, he said, has arisen because postmodernism has ‘created a space for reassessment and self-reflexivity’ and so history in the museum operates in a subversive fashion, aiming to reveal injustices or historical elisions.42 ‘Taboo subjects’ he commented ‘are treated as part of a wider strategy of resistance against the continuum of an ordered repressive and hegemonic present whose “counter-stories” and “destabilising narratives” are generally unwelcomed.’43 Certainly the Pigott Report prefigured the interest in the NMA in the identification of injustices, especially in the treatment of Australia’s

41 ibid.
43 ibid.
Indigenous peoples. The original proposal for the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia was seen (as discussed in chapter two), not as a symbol of a guilty conscience, but as a correction to both the ignorance and injustices of the past and their continuing legacy in the present.

Another model identified by Williams was that of exposure, in the sense that the museum champions the democratic right to know. Exposure of taboo or difficult subjects, or their parallel removal or disappearance from public scrutiny, is, Williams said, a 'modality of power.' Exposure, therefore, reveals the uses of that power, and thus the 'interrogation of established institutions is no longer taboo.' In this instance, the NMA exposed government policy and complicity in the miserable experiences of Aboriginal people forcefully removed, as children, from their families' care, and the myth of peaceful settlement as an act of invasion, paralleled with episodes of resistance and violence, as well as accommodations made to survive.

A third theoretical model that is also evidenced in the NMA is that of the capacity for rational inquiry in the museum. Williams said that 'the rational museum’s agenda is the disposal of fear, the dispersal of what threatens' and so it does this by a methodology which is detached, scientific and non-exploitative. In the NMA this was achieved by an account of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and beliefs, explaining Dreaming Stories, attachments to land and Indigenous material culture, in order to foster national understanding and familiarity and in the process overcome the ignorance and misunderstanding of white Australians, while simultaneously engendering Indigenous pride.

44 ibid.
45 ibid.
46 ibid.
The NMA could be said to employ each of these models in its expositions of Indigenous cultures and history. Clearly these modes of inquiry have revealed disjunctures in Australia's sense of national identity and contributed immensely to the stirring of the debates about our history.

Since these debates became prominent a major Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs of the Museum was announced by the NMA Council in late 2002 and delivered in July 2003. The Review itself was controversial, a direct outcome of criticisms of the Museum by members of Council and others, and was conducted under very loose terms of reference. Graeme Davison declared that 'there are indeed ominous signs that the Howard government is bent on historical revisionism. Over the past four years the director and her staff have been the target of an unrelenting campaign, led by two members of the museum's council, David Barnett and Christopher Pearson, to bring the museum's exhibits into closer alignment with the government's views of national history.'

John Mulvaney expressed concern for the future independence of the museum and declared that 'I regret that the museum is being ideologically driven by a council minority with ministerial access, acting in the mistaken belief that they must save the museum from ideological error,' reflecting the widespread concern about the make-up of the Review Committee. Appointed by the Federal Government, specifically by the relevant Minister, Rod Kemp, the Committee included Dr John Carroll as Chair, Reader in Sociology at La Trobe University. Carroll had been an old undergraduate friend of Rod Kemp and particularly critical of what he saw as the undermining of Australia's traditions in the Bicentenary programs. Others were Richard Longes, Director of Investec Australia Ltd; Dr Philip Jones, Senior Curator of Anthropology at the South Australian Museum; and Dr Patricia Vickers-Rich, Director of the Monash

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47 Davison, Graeme, 2002, 'Exhibiting a revisionist view of our history', Age, 12 December, p. 17.
Science Centre. There was no historian in the group, and those included had reputations for some conservatism, and with the exception of Dr Jones, little experience of museums. Christopher Pearson, a conservative member of Council, used his influence in the Prime Minister's office, according to Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, to put pressure on the Council for the Review to go ahead and had pushed for Dr Jones to be on the Committee, who was an 'ally during the Hindmarsh Island affair.'\(^50\) The Review was to examine the aims and content of museum programs, whether the museum has complied with its role and functions as set out in the 1980 Act that established the Museum, its Charter and 'other relevant documents' and 'whether the Government's vision in approving funding for the development of the Museum has been realized.'\(^51\) The search was on for evidence of bias in the presentations of the Museum. At the same time as the Review was established, it was announced that Director Dawn Casey's contract would be renewed for only twelve months. Arts reviewer John McDonald (and erstwhile curator of Australian art at the NGA) commented that 'it is hard to see the decision as anything but ideological and it has been enacted with cynical indifference with regard to the media or public opinion' and explained this by declaring that 'the government probably does believe that Casey “has done a good job”, but it is now expedient to bump her off so “someone else” can institute the kind of policies and a version of Australian history that the Prime Minister and his colleagues find more acceptable.'\(^52\)

\(^{50}\) Macintyre, Stuart, and Clark, Anna, 2003, op. cit., p. 196. The Hindmarsh Island affair concerned a decision in the early 1990s to build a bridge from Goolwa in South Australia to Hindmarsh Island, at the mouth of the Murray river. Aboriginal women claimed the island was special to them for reasons that could not be revealed and successfully achieved the banning of the bridge. About a year later, another group of Aboriginal women, asserted that the original claim was all fabricated. A Royal Commission resulted, confirming this refutation, and, as Margaret Simons has noted, 'ever since then, the conventional wisdom has been that the affair, and the willingness of white people to believe the Aboriginal women, marked the high-water mark of politically correct soft-headedness and sentimentality.' See Margaret Simons 'Hindmarsh: where lies the truth?' The Age, May 9, 2003 - An extract from Simons' book The Meeting of the Waters - The Hindmarsh Island Affair, Hodder Headline, 2003. http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/05/08/1052280376344.html [Accessed: 27 July 2004].


ended her term in mid December 2003 and the Museum was then under the temporary Directorship of Craddock Morton, a career public servant and one-time arts adviser to former Prime Minister Paul Keating, until he was officially appointed in June 2004.53

The public were invited to make submissions to the Review and the Committee received a number from individuals as well as particular interest groups and peak bodies. While many saw things that could be improved in the Museum, responses were largely positive. A number of submissions raised the issue of political interference in the museum and suggested that the Review was too soon in the life of the Museum. Professor Frank Talbot (a former member of the Pigott Committee) wrote that not only was the Review premature but expressed concern at the ‘virtual firing’ of the Director. He declared ‘something deeper is clearly underway, and from what I have read and been told I am forced to the conclusion that this is a political attempt to sanitise our history: to hide away the brutal aspects of colonisation perpetrated by both invading and invaded populations.’54 Historian Dr Tom Griffiths noted that criticisms of particular displays had been assessed and debated continually and patiently, some accommodated in changes and others rejected. He observed though that

Council members have maintained their criticism without amendment and, having failed to win support from the scholarly community or the general public for their campaign, seem now to have turned to your Review

53 Morton’s appointment, despite his previous Labor affiliations, was described in the media as putting the ‘conservative writing on the wall’ and, when he announced changes resulting from the Review, Senator Kate Lundy said that the ‘handpicked foot soldier of the Howard Government…has begun the whitewashing of the National Museum’. (Quoted in Sydney Morning Herald, August 11, 2004. www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/10/1092102445137.html?from=storyrhs Accessed: 4.11.2003) The changes resulting from the Review are not part of my thesis, as the Museum has only just started to implement them, and the process will continue until 2008. It will be important to chart the shifts in interpretation and approach before being able to judge how far they move from the mission of the NMA at opening in 2001.
54 Talbot, Frank, letter dated 7 March, 2003, submission to Review Committee.
(his comments were addressed to Dr John Carroll, Chair of the Review Committee)

as a more private, more controlled way of enforcing a particular agenda upon the National Museum of Australia. Your Review is in danger of being seen as another example of energetic Howard Government historical revisionism.55

Griffiths outlined some critical corrections to the Council's complaints about the presentation of history in the NMA and, in closing, urged that the Committee repudiate 'the political circumstances of your creation and conduct a more open-minded review'. Mr R. A. Forbes from the ACT made a plea, as a regular visitor to the NMA, that the Review be open and public. He wrote:

I would like to believe that you will make every effort to listen to the people who go to the Museum, and to consult and understand the surveys of visitors I believe the Museum has conducted. You have a responsibility not just to a Government and its department in this review. This is a Museum of and for the people of Australia.56

The Friends of the NMA Inc. noted their support and pride in the Museum, and said that while some of them disagreed with details in the permanent exhibitions, they knew that some material was challenging. 'Social history', they said, 'is not, in a democracy, dictated by a few, and we hope that visitors will, as part of their experience, debate what they have viewed in the Museum.'57 Others, also aware of the reasons for the Review stemming from concerns about the emphasis on Indigenous history, declared that:

Governments have a responsibility to encourage another view, that Australian indigenous history has a much longer and is equally as complex richness as European history [sic]....as taxpayers we are very happy with results of our

money being spent on this museum. The Government does not fund it, the people of Australia fund it and that means Sue and me.58

One younger NMA visitor expressed a view of the NMA that many museums would envy. Having said she loved the Museum, she made a comment that suggested the NMA was successfully reaching a new audience. She observed that:

Museums in general so often talk about a history so long ago that I find myself wandering the galleries as a spectator only. But at the NMA I am a participant and that wonderful feeling of empathy is generated...I know that some of the exhibitions are controversial. Rather than admonishing that fact however, I say let us celebrate it...The NMA has sparked discussion amongst many of my family and friends...I think this discussion is fantastic. Through discussion, debate and indeed argument the NMA has got people thinking about the social history of this nation. It is via this debate and thinking that one is truly able to say that this is a Museum of a clever country. [author's emphases]59

In stark contrast, several correspondents wrote objecting to what they called the 'political propaganda' of the Museum. For instance, 'the National Museum is a blatantly political museum...[and] needs to start again so that it represents all Australians and displays the true history of the country, which is overwhelmingly positive'60. The writer concluded that 'drastic and ruthless surgery is required.'61 Another made a request for a record of 'Prime Ministerial succession dating from Federation', stating that the history of successive governments and their decisions 'have become the reality of the public realm...these are the issues that have traditionally united and divided Australians and upon which they vote. And it is this story that the National Museum of Australia has a duty to assemble and exhibit.'62

60 Edgar, Peter, letter dated 7 March, 2003, submission to Review Committee.
61 ibid.
62 Horton, Timothy, letter, undated, submission to Review Committee.
An unusual response, which indicated the polarisation sometimes provoked by the NMA, came from a marketing expert who wrote because of 'a deep and passionate disappointment our family felt as a result of our inspection review of the National Museum's exhibitry.' His letter claimed that the Australian War Memorial was more marketable and said:

The current museum product has a preoccupation for depicting the history of our nation in terms of constant struggle and turmoil. From a marketing viewpoint, it is one monstrous lead-balloon for a whole raft of reasons. Neither has the current museum product any likelihood of attracting any genuine corporate sponsorships because surprise, surprise, corporate Australia is managed by Anglo-Saxons, the same species who represent the majority of the population of this nation; and who have been pre-eminently responsible for Australia's growth and productivity which has made this nation proud and achievement oriented.

The Museum itself made a very considered and detailed response, outlining the nature of museums in general and specifically setting out the rationale for the vision and role of the NMA. The submission established the philosophy of NMA exhibitions and public programs, made an assessment of its own performance and investigated the Museum's future priorities. In particular, the NMA submission discussed the nature of historical interpretation, noting that history is 'almost never a set of absolute, proven "facts", but a growing and ever changing body of information... It made a case for a new understanding of the work of history museums, saying

traditionally museums have believed that what they know and show is based on the best scholarship and research available. This works well in the physical and natural sciences where radical changes or paradigm shifts are few and far between.

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64 ibid.
However, conveying recent history in a museum context presents a special challenge...every exhibition reflects in one way or another choices made by its developers and advisers.66

The submission then stressed the need for balanced viewpoints and referred to the Council-approved document (Statement of Aims and Objectives for Historical Interpretation in the National Museum of Australia, 2000) which established that the Museum should "stimulate legitimate doubt and thoughtful discussion...[and] give voice to differing views of the national past."67

Meanwhile, when the Review was delivered in July 2003 it turned out not to produce quite the terrible assessments that were anticipated by many in the museum industry. It concluded that bias was not a consistent problem in the Museum and even recognized that the NMA was a 'work-in-progress'. Significantly, it even praised the presentation of Indigenous history and culture in the Museum. Yet what has become evident from the Review is the fact that the role and influence of Council needs to be questioned, particularly in terms of its own political affiliations.68 While this was not the first NMA Museum Council to include political appointments,69 it was the first to engage in a public battle essentially pitting staff and Council against one another.

One of the major underlying concerns was the inadequate attention paid by the Review to the issue of competing philosophies on the role of national museums.

66 ibid.
67 National Museum of Australia, 2003, Submission by the National Museum of Australia to National Museum of Australia Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs, Canberra, NMA, p. 16 National Museum of Australia, 2003, Submission by the National Museum of Australia to National Museum of Australia Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs, Canberra, NMA. An interesting reflection on the nature of history can be seen in the recent publication Curthoys, Ann and Docker, John, 2005, Is History Fiction?, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, which analyses the double character of history as both a thorough scrutiny of sources and a narrative, making it as much a part of literature as of history.
68 The role of museum boards includes the need to acquire sufficient understanding of the museum and the role of cultural institutions, as well fiduciary responsibility, advocacy, an oversight role, a duty of care and a duty of loyalty to the institution. The role of museum governing bodies is discussed in a range of useful web sites, including www.nonprofit- info.org/npofaq and www.ncnb.org [Accessed: 14.10.2005].
The desire for attendance to tradition was at odds with new museological aspirations and practices, which themselves have arisen from critiques over several decades of the role of museums in society. Rather than acknowledging these differences of approach (including to the nature of historical practice) and discussing the implications of these differences, the Review Committee chose to focus on detail, picking apart curatorial choices, based on opinion rather than considered research. This was ironic given that the Review identified sound research as necessary in all Museum practices. The Review's suggestions ultimately appear as a kind of hubris, especially in the light of the lack of an historian on the Committee and the inclusion of only one museum professional who, notably, differed with opinions on exhibitions. For example, there are various suggestions included in the Report. They range from adding 'a number of large rocks that trace the geological history of the continent' to the Garden of Australian Dreams,70 to casting the audience in the introductory Circa audio-visual 'as sailors on Captain Cook's longboat approaching the shore for the first time' (the audience is obviously cast as white and British) to an accompanying scene in reverse 'from the Aboriginal perspective on the shore...an attempt to make sense of the approaching longboat and its weird-looking occupants though Dreaming stories might be incorporated' (as if, perhaps, Aboriginal history, began only at this point).71

A close analysis of the Review reveals that the Committee preferred to 'read more consensus than plurality at the core of the national collective conscience' (without providing evidence to justify this belief) and to see national culture as less a 'fictitious construct' and 'fluid' but more as a 'reflection of deeper continuities.'72 This remained simply an assertion as it was not backed up by any considered argument or evidence. Interestingly, while the Report accepted the

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71 ibid., p. 18 – 19, my emphasis.
72 ibid., p. 8.
loose conception of the NMA as a social history museum, its understanding of social history seemed to only be what it described as a history of ideas and the social effects of science and environment, apparently unaware of its origins in 'history from below'. The report uncritically accepted the belief in an Australian rhetoric of a stable, prosperous and successful democracy. Yet it also stated that it accepted that a national museum has an obligation to 'cover darker episodes...with truthfulness, sobriety and balance' but essentially did not want these to disrupt the narrative of triumphant progress – preferring that they be seen as aberrant side-tracks, the nation momentarily forgetting its way. Thus its vision of a national museum was essentially that of celebration, memorialisation and spectacle rather than as a site for national self-reflection. It saw the NMA's major flaw as its lack of compelling narratives, but largely sidestepped the question of just whose narratives it should be telling, or whose versions, simply reaffirming the need to tell 'the national story'. This is a reminder of what Macintyre has noted, that the term 'identity' has been generally discouraged in conservative circles recently. He quoted the Prime Minister's 1996 Sir Robert Menzies lecture, saying that John Howard condemned the 'endless and agonised navel-gazing about who we are, or as seems to have happened, over recent years, as part of a “perpetual seminar” for elite opinion about our national identity,' and that David Barnett, when looking at Museum labels, 'reminded Tony Staley that the 'Prime Minister was adamant that the Museum was not to define an Australian identity'.73 Ironically though, one of the tasks the National Museum set itself, in the light of the new museology, as discussed in chapter three, was not to define a national identity but to explore the many possibilities and interpretations of the notion itself.74

74 The NMA even advertises itself (see television advertisements) as a place to find out what it means to be Australian. The NMA's Ethics Statement (see discussion in chapter two) states that the NMA 'acknowledges that frameworks of knowledge and interpretation are constructed within social settings' and that 'this requires a willingness to present contingent and conflicting views', 2003, Ethics Statement, National Museum of Australia website, http://www.nma.gov.au/aboutus/policy/ethicsstatement [Accessed: 4.5.2003].
Clearly, the Review of the NMA was an attempt to insert a particular political agenda into the exhibitions and programs of the Museum. Though evidently at arms length, it seemed that government influence (or interference) was a significant element in the whole event. The fact that the Report was milder than expected did not change the problematic future of the NMA. Director Dawn Casey was removed and it still remains to be seen what changes may be implemented as a result of the Report — exhibitions have begun to be altered during 2005 and this will continue up to 2008. Staff responded to Council with suggestions for changes, not made public, and only a few announcements were made about proposals for exhibition or program variations. The new Director, Craddock Morton, has not been as publicly visible or outspoken as Casey. The battles over truth and interpretation experienced in the NMA have had familiar parallels in many similar institutions from the Museum of New Zealand: Te Papa Tongarewa (Our Place), the Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian with its controversial Enola Gay exhibition about the bombing of Hiroshima and other national institutions, to state and regional museums across Australia.75 What this suggests is that the mix of public money and the public sphere creates a sense of ownership of the public statements of the museum. Increasingly, those who claim to speak on behalf of the taxpayer demand a say in determining the public statements of the museum. This presents the museum with an interesting dilemma, for while the new museology seeks an engagement from, and within, the public sphere, the demands made upon it are not those of a democratic public sphere, but those of sectors with sufficient power and influence to claim the right to speak for others. Ironically, perhaps the new museology is not possible within this context?

Conclusion

The history wars in the NMA served as a forum for public debate on the very nature and purposes of history, and proved that the museum has a powerful role in the interpretation of that history. While the issues were canvassed within a public sphere that was sometimes out of the Museum’s control, as in the media beat-ups, the NMA responded by accepting the challenge and incorporating the debates within its own programs - through a forum, publications, in education material on its own website, and in exhibition labels and texts. In this way, it was able to ensure that a range of informed opinion was brought to bear on the discussions and that this was available to the visiting public as well as those who were direct players in the battle. Nevertheless, the Museum has been deeply affected by the Review and the events leading up to it. Scholars Kylie Message and Chris Healy have pointed to a paradox inherent in the Museum’s position. While questioning grand narratives, invoking a forum for contentious issues, and engaging critical exhibition strategies, the museum has been caught in a political web of its own that it cannot contest. As Message and Healy have described it, ‘when it comes to the real politics of budgets, the appointment of directors, and parliamentary politics, ground cannot be contested as if it were a mere play of interpretation.’76 As a national institution, the capacity of the NMA to operate freely as a new museum is actually quite restricted.

Changes in museums in Australia over the last twenty years have increasingly opened them up to a broader and more diverse range of communities and to new discourses. Sometimes this has resulted in government pressure to restrict their public statements or communications (through collections and exhibitions) or even actual government interference in their operations. More frequently, it results in an inability of government to accept or acknowledge that museums, if

they are to improve or maintain their status as impartial institutions, need to be
seen to have some measure of independence from government. Thus, the
rhetoric of the new museology becomes very difficult to negotiate in practice. It
is in this position in which the National Museum of Australia finds itself – a
position which might well be described by the chess term 'zugzwang' which
refers to a position in which a player is obliged to move but cannot do so
without disadvantage.
Part Three: Museum culture, ‘public’ culture

7

‘Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’
(the more things change, the more they stay the same)

Museums are no longer the exclusive enclaves of the elite and the privileged. They have become centers of learning where doors to new experiences are opened to all. They have become our reinvented town squares where people of like minds and interests meet, share and engage. With visionary leadership museums can be at the core of a new civic culture where the distinctions between public and private (space and missions) become blurred. Nicholas Boonin, US exhibition designer in private practice, 2001, ‘The future of museums’, April
www.nicholasboonin.com/articles/museumfuture.pdf

This is now the dream for many museums across the world and across Australia - to be the reinvented town square, the core of a new civic culture, a new public space. Over at least the last two decades, museums in Australia have witnessed and participated in many changes - in economics, in culture, in communications, in management and in professional practice – that have both encouraged and impacted on this dream. As well, the destabilising of concepts such as identity and culture have raised both practical and theoretical concerns for museums, which in turn have resulted in a continual renegotiation of organisational orthodoxies and activities. Yet is the contemporary Australian museum actually becoming the core of this ‘new civic culture’ as it often professes it is trying to be?
This chapter will investigate the practical and theoretical issues affecting new museological formations in Australia. For example, ‘community’ is frequently invoked in the new museum as a trope for the location of identity, both extending relationships beyond the boundaries of nation, addressing concepts of globalisation and hybridity, and contracting back to explorations of new local relationships. Communication is a key factor in the establishment of these relationships. New museums seek to expand beyond formal education to both create new and incorporate existing experiences as a valid part of a new dialogue with participants (now much more than just visitors). Virtual or digital technologies take this communication beyond the realm of the physical museum site and thus open up new ways of relating to art and material culture. Scholarly disciplines and professional orthodoxies are increasingly being broken down and exposed to new methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches. At the same time, the museum is often besieged by public debate and its premises are increasingly questioned by those not privy to its ‘professional’ habitus. Museum missions, while informed by desires for social justice and equity, are equally governed by managerialist beliefs and methods, economic imperatives (including commercialisation, commodification and branding) and the unresolved disaccord in contemporary Australia between privatisation and public service.

Such is the climate in which Australian museums are operating in the early 21st century. Some are struggling with the issues, others have adapted to changes imposed on them but have not altered the structure or basis of their operations. These remain essentially orthodox institutions, faithful to the modernist canon. This is not to suggest that change is part of some evolutionary imperative (though in globalisation frequent and radical change has been normalised), but it could be expected that more nuanced responses are necessary in a diverse cultural environment. The case studies will be discussed in the light of these issues and the chapter will speculate on the possibilities of achieving a ‘new civic culture’ in Australian museums in this milieu.
One of the primary issues for museums at present is that of identity. This has enormous implications for the understanding of and political importance of culture and has generated many of the recent changes in museums.

Identity, diversity, and the object in the museum

In the context of a globalised world, marginalised or colonised cultural identities are often described as in the process of destruction by a hegemonic western culture. The interests of, say, Indigenous peoples, diasporic communities, or women, may be overlooked or deliberately ignored in the quest for economic or market expansion or in the face of globalised communications representing (or creating) mass international audiences rather than localised groups. This understanding of cultural identity is premised on the notion of either a pure culture, in which, for instance, national or local identities persist, unchanged, or a form of miscegenation in which an international, global context of outside influences mixes with and destroys the original culture.¹

Yet cultural identity is also increasingly seen as open-ended, imbued with influences from ‘outside’. It is neither stable nor singular, but rather heterogenous and fragmented. Homi Bhabha employs a theory of cultural hybridity in which the boundaries of cultures are the sites where problematic (or misunderstood) interactions occur.² Bhabha distinguishes between cultural difference and cultural diversity, describing cultural diversity as ‘culture as an object of empirical knowledge’ and cultural difference as ‘the process of the enunciation of culture as “knowledgeable”, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification.’³ As

³ ibid., p. 34.
Bhabha says, cultural difference ‘focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the name of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation.’

So it is at the interstices of culture, where interactions produce new meanings or new patterns, that what Bhabha calls a Third Space emerges. This Third Space, a hybrid space, produces not a mix of two cultures (one dominant, one subordinate) but a third cultural form – which is not immediately recognisable, but is a site of the discourse between the two. Thus, for Bhabha, in a specifically post-colonial context, it works as a kind of resistance against assimilation into the dominant culture. Multiple cultural identities are therefore possible, and may vary according to the space or context in which they operate.

Are such multiple identities expressed in the new or re-invented museum? And has the museum actually altered in response to these new discourses or is it just expanding categories to fit more in? The issue of identity, including multiculturalism, has influenced the practices of museums and while I have chosen in this thesis to focus on a case study of Indigeneity (see chapter four) it is useful to note that diverse identities have been recognised by museums as a factor in cultural practice. In the National Gallery of Australia though, it could be argued that in the display of the permanent collections the story of art has remained the same. Rather than shifting from a tale of modernist progress, the dominant western paradigm is intact. Artists whose work traverses cultural borders are still fitted within the same modern story, with minor adjustments to allow the adaptation, or even as exceptions who prove the rule.

4 ibid.
Artists like Guan Wei, whose work may be said to be exploring that Third Space, are still absorbed into the larger western narrative of Australian art, as are Indigenous artists – the national is inscribed in this story and the art still functions to illustrate the achievements of the nation. The narrative incorporates pluralist visions – we are depicted in cultural terms as a diverse and multicultural nation – but the essential story has not changed. There are just more, and more diverse, players. Similar to the way in which art museums seamlessly absorbed works of art critical of the museum itself, its narrative continues to expand, but not to shift its basic premises. Instead the museum could consciously question and break down national categories, drawing on cross-cultural themes and transmigratory patterns and modes of culture.

As art historian and critical theorist Irit Rogoff has noted ‘in relation to cultural difference within western cultural institutions, we seem to have made a smooth transition from exclusion to inclusion, from xenophobia to xenophilia in one fell swoop without unravelling ourselves or our

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7 Professor Irit Rogoff is Chair of Art History and Visual Culture at Goldsmith’s College, London.
institutional practices in the process. If the nation is an imaginary construction, then it may be possible to imagine many 'nations' within and across geographic boundaries, rather than seeking a subordination to an abstract, unitary idea of nation. Rogoff suggests that '...this infinitely expansive inclusiveness practised by so many exhibiting institutions is actually grounded in an unrevise...
the exhibition showed ten years of acquisitions from the Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund, surveying a number of artists' depictions of landscape under the umbrella of a major sponsor of acquisitions, businessman Gordon Darling. Essentially this was a small survey show, exhibiting a range of recent approaches to the subject of landscape in the medium of the original print.

The discourses of cultural difference are limited to those described by artists themselves in their work. The art of Dadang Christanto, whose installations and performances (enacted in the NGA) have explored the recent history of Indonesia through both personal and political perspectives, provides an apparent illustration of the issues, but it is the artist who creates this dialogue, not the museum. Similarly the NGA holds several works by Chilean born artist Juan Davila whose work probes issues of cultural and sexual identity, hybridity and history. Yet the museum itself continues to encase these works within a tightly curatorial structure of art historical developments, placing sometimes regional interests firmly in the context of a global art discourse, one that incorporates international exhibition circuits and an expanded but essentially unchanged market network. In this context art engages with other art, and, while the art itself is often about concepts of human rights or cross-cultural encounters, it is only rarely that the art museum itself crosses the boundaries between art and life.

While there is obviously still a need and desire for personal encounters with the individual work of art, a space for contemplation and spiritual engagement (and perhaps some curators would argue that some works of art

12 In the NGA labels usually include artist, country of birth and residence, birth and death dates, title and date of work, the place where the work was produced, and the source of acquisition. Occasionally additional wall text will outline historical or other details which are relevant to the work. In the case of Dadang Christanto his work has been displayed with no reference to his own experience of Indonesian political repression, or of the country's turmoils of recent decades. (Angela Philp field notes) The NGA owns Christanto's Red Rain [Hujan merah], 2003, an installation made from mixed media, including wool, paper, gold, ink and pigments. This work concerns the suffering and persecution experienced by some Indonesians in 1965 under the Suharto regime.

require only this), art museums have failed to generate a further engagement with the discourses of a cultural public sphere that are now referred to in the practices of many artists. Indeed, in spite of the rhetoric of the museum as forum, they have deliberately distanced themselves from the dialogue. Why? It may be convenient to suggest that the museum is foregrounding the artist’s interests rather than the museum’s but this seems deliberately perverse. To fully engage in dialogue, it may be necessary to abandon or redefine the canon of the art museum. It is not considered appropriate for an art museum to debate the content of a politically engaged work of art. It seems, currently, to be constitutionally impossible for the art museum to do so.

Every activity of an art museum is predicated on a relationship with the object and its objecthood, not just its representational meaning. For the art museum, the art object must necessarily retain its isolation. Aesthetic considerations and the reification of the experience of the unique or hallowed (a still religious reverence) prevail. When the object is primary, connoisseurship is central, not peripheral. Objects in art museums are still almost universally categorised and controlled according to media. Paintings are stored with paintings, ceramics with ceramics, sculpture with sculpture, photography with photography, and works on paper with works on paper, assisting in the physical management of works. Curators, similarly, are engaged often on the basis of responsibility for particularly media, as much as historical periods or geographical locations. As well as a curator of International Art and a curator of Australian Art, the NGA employs separate curators of prints and drawings, photography, fashion and textiles and decorative arts, while Asian art and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art also have their own curators. While the NGA’s Australian collections have integrated the decorative arts with painting, sculpture and works on paper in the colonial galleries, as seen in chapter five, it was as much for reasons of perceived collection ‘gaps’, as a desire to reveal a spirit of a period. Notably, as the collection displays move further into the twentieth century, the integration becomes increasingly thin.
Authenticity and provenance refer us back again to the ‘signature’ or originality of the artist, even in the face of industrially produced art multiples or ‘found objects’ used by artists. Objects are researched according to their relationships with other objects – on the basis of, for example, style, subject, media, date. This is in accord with the conventions of art history. For those unfamiliar with these conventions and their accompanying stories of progress through history, the art museum is increasingly providing additional explanatory information (through extended text labels, catalogues, audio guides, volunteer guide tours or computer kiosks) to fill in gaps in the viewer's knowledge. More rare are attempts to assist the viewer's visual literacy, to help see or imagine new relationships, not only with other art objects, but with other aspects of culture, history, society and ideas – a multidisciplinary way of looking and understanding. The idea of the work of art being seen devoid of context (other than the context of other art) is still deeply embedded in the art museum.

Perhaps in a multidisciplinary museum there is a greater likelihood of broader contextualising of objects. As referred to in chapter three, MAGNT's 2003 exhibition, ‘Speaking with cloth: Cerita Dalam Kain’ was an example of drawing aesthetic, social, historical, political and economic threads together to more fully explore the meanings of the textiles. But more than this, it used a development process that incorporated the knowledge and participation of the traditional Indonesian owners, so that the exhibition was more collaborative rather than being the exclusive preserve of the curator. Dialogue was built into the exhibition process. By doing so, and in a strange inversion of the usual power of the museum ‘voice’, the exhibition had more cultural authority than if it had been a solo museum effort. In contrast, the exhibition at the NGA, also in 2003, ‘Sari to Sarong: 500 years of Indian and Indonesian textile exchange’, while containing a great deal of similar information including about ritual uses of cloth, failed to inspire the same spirit, instead the curator focussed on the visual experimentation inspired by centuries of trade. This aesthetic emphasis is perhaps a perfectly acceptable way for an art museum to approach the subject, but what was
missing was the deep connection between object and meaning, which in MAGNT's case brought the textiles truly alive.

Similarly, it is interesting to consider the impact of the Aboriginal Memorial in the NGA, compared to the impact of Aboriginal history in the NMA. As I argued earlier, it is less politically confronting, presumably because, as a work of art, its political statement can remain aestheticised and therefore remote from the 'real' world. The artists and the presentation of the work work are seen as independent of the views of the institution.

By contrast, in the NMA, Aboriginal history has been a focus of contention. Works of Indigenous art have been used to illustrate historical theses by the Museum and thus, in some sense, they do not exist as objects in their own right, or should I say, for their own sake — they are adjuncts to curatorial statements. For instance, Fiona Foley's *Annihilation of the Blacks* in the First Australians Gallery functions to create an emotional response to the record of frontier violence, and refers to both the broader history of massacres as well as to the removal of her own ancestors from Fraser Island.

![Image of Fiona Foley's work](image)

Fiona Foley 1986

*wood, synthetic polymer paint, feathers, hair, rope*

*Collection National Museum of Australia*

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14 See for example, the discussion of the use of emotion in NMA in Message, Kylie & Healy, Chris, 2004, op. cit.
15 Angela Philp field notes.
Historian Susan Crane, who, as noted in chapter six, identified a public resistance to historians, has said that ‘art which comments on historical consciousness is never merely creative and fictional: such art deliberately references a body of knowledge and experience shared by historically conscious viewers.’ Thus historically conscious art in the museum makes the relations between private and public, history and memory and the experience of the museum far more complex. The outcome of this is that the work in the National Museum has been a far greater subject of public dialogue. It engages emotional as well as intellectual responses. Issues have been debated in both the museum, the media and scholarly forums (see discussion in chapter six). Ultimately the public engagement with these things has been over their meanings and stories, and how these impact on contemporary Australian culture. Certainly social history as a method is highly attuned to the interests of the new museology. Perhaps this is simply an indication that different types of museums are useful for different types of knowledge? But when museums such as the NGA declare themselves interested in the forum, the debates of a cultural public sphere, they could be seen to be entering new territory that would suggest the possibility of a paradigm shift in their activities. The question arises whether art history is up to the task, or should broader visual studies be brought into play? I will return to this later. First, it is necessary to look at how the nature of the museum as an institution, with its own hierarchies and bureaucracy, is constrained in its attempts to shift its focus.

Governance, Commerce and Managerialism

Museums in Australia are no longer isolated from the world of commerce. Over the past two decades patterns of management in museums have changed. Once the job of director was the preserve of successful

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professionals, frequently coming from the ranks of curators and rising to the
top of their profession. While this model still has some cogency for those
working within museums, it is becoming increasingly common for directors
to\textsuperscript{17} come from administrative or business ranks, to be required to have more
of a business orientation, to be more entrepreneurial, and to adopt a new set
of management principles that are in some ways the antithesis of the
traditional model of curatorial practice. This has also been reinforced by the
increasing interest in having business skills and political influence
represented on governing boards. This has been the case in recent
appointments in the NMA. Both the NMA and NGA Councils have
purposely included people with high-level business and political
connections.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, in many museums, directors have been increasingly
drawn from the ranks of generic managers rather than museum specialists.
Dawn Casey and her replacement, Craddock Morton, were both career
public servants, chosen for their general managerial skills, not for any special
expertise in the tasks and mission of museums. Previous NMA directors (Dr.
Don McMichael, Margaret Coaldrake and Dr. Bill Jonas) were all specialists
in either museums or heritage. Interestingly, the NGA has so far resisted this
trend. It’s directors (as in the various state galleries) have all come from
specialist art backgrounds.

In writing about arts management, academic Christine Burton has noted that
‘the sense now is that cultural organizations and programs should be subject
to some market forces, and it is generally recognized that all arts
organizations must now operate in a mixed economy. This mix is
increasingly tipped toward seeking more private sources of revenue and
increasing entrepreneurial activity.’\textsuperscript{19} While this applies to a broad range of
cultural organisations, it is a particularly powerful force in Australian
museums. In 1994, the Australian Government, under Labor Prime Minister
Paul Keating, introduced a major cultural policy titled ‘Creative Nation’.

\textsuperscript{17} See Appendix B for a list of directors in the NMA and NGA.
\textsuperscript{18} See Appendix A for selected details on NMA and NGA Council members.
\textsuperscript{19} Burton, Christine, 2003, ‘Scoping the Challenge: Entrepreneurial Arts Management in
Times of Uncertainty’ in The Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society, Fall, Vol. 33,
no. 3, p. 186.
Essentially it stressed the importance of market forces, particularly encouraging greater links between economic and cultural development.\(^20\)

This was boldly expressed in the policy’s introductory statement, which included the following:

> This cultural policy is also an economic policy. Culture creates wealth. Broadly defined, our cultural industries generate 13 billion dollars a year. Culture employs. Around 336,000 Australians are employed in culture-related industries. Culture adds value, it makes an essential contribution to innovation, marketing and design. It is a badge of our industry. The level of our creativity substantially determines our ability to adapt to new economic imperatives. It is a valuable export in itself and an essential accompaniment to the export of other commodities. It attracts tourists and students. It is essential to our economic success.\(^21\)

This was not entirely new rhetoric, but this was the first time that it was so clearly spelled out. ‘Creative Nation’, while declaring continued government support, squarely placed cultural heritage in a new nexus with the private sector.

The policy stated that ‘support for the arts from government will never meet all its needs. Government policies aim to create an environment where the arts can achieve maximum support. The Government believes that the private sector – whether individuals or corporations – has an important role to play in this.’ Despite a commitment to ongoing government financial support, this seemed to herald a shift in the balance to a more American style of entrepreneurship and philanthropy, backed up by government. The policy then went on to suggest that the more market-oriented style of cultural production could provide a model for other sectors. ‘Much of Australia’s cultural heritage is privately owned – including heritage objects and buildings. The private sector is a major investor in arts infrastructure


including film and television facilities, cinemas and commercial galleries. It also invests in arts software including film and television programming material, literature, the performing arts and sound recordings; and endows the arts through gifts of items and money.22 Expansion of the 1978 taxation incentives for the arts scheme, a review of corporate and private sponsorship, new legislation to encourage cultural bequests, and the encouragement of business sponsor partnerships were significant outcomes of the policy.23 One of its major planks was the integration of multimedia in cultural industries into economic policy, in the belief that multimedia could become a significant export industry for Australia. Government seed funding was expected to assist the creation of self-funding enterprises, firmly linking cultural activity to the development of the national economy. The museum, as part of the cultural heritage industry in Australia, was to be 'removed from the everyday circulation of things,'24 to engagement with real markets and economic value systems.

Economic life is increasingly globalised, as markets are managed across national boundaries, and this enables new political and corporate relationships. Some analysts have described a shift from discrete national governments to a more networked system of governance and markets. In other words, hierarchical systems of government, with the nation state at the top, are yielding to diverse exchanges between a range of organisational forms. For example, social scientists Hans Krause Hansen and Dorte Salskov-Iversen, have referred to the production of 'managerialised patterns of political authority' which they describe as firstly 'the globalisation and transnationalisation of political government and economic life, i.e. a process of de-nationalisation which sets the stage for new patterns of political, social

and corporate governance, typified by the “partnership”25 in other words, transnational economic interests, often in partnership with governments, create new forms of authority that are separated from democratic processes of accountability. Secondly, Hansen and Salskov-Iversen note that this is then paralleled with ‘the spread of new organisational forms that operate at the transnational level, peddling knowledge about how to govern and manage, with claims to expertise while being simultaneously unaccountable to any political authority, in particular the state’. Thirdly, they identify what they call ‘the profound reframing of both political subjects and public sector employees from welfare-dependent citizen-dopes/rule-fixated, red-tape-generating bureaucrats to empowered, risk-taking and efficiency-seeking entrepreneurs who assume responsibility for their lives and jobs in times of generalised uncertainty.’26 They associate these changes with the reconstruction of social life on a market basis which results in a new management discourse regulating behaviour and attitudes. This is currently being borne out in the Howard government’s changes to industrial relations laws in Australia, but has been part of broader government rhetoric (not just by conservative governments) for some time.27

One way to understand governance, says cultural theorist Jeremy Valentine, is ‘in terms of emerging patterns of response to the decline of state authority, partly as a symptom of the weakening of legitimacy and its centrality as a pole of subjective identification in the construction of what a citizen is supposed to “feel”, but also as the withdrawal of government and state institutions from their traditional activities as these cross the threshold of

26 ibid.
“the law of diminishing returns”. The demand that museums increasingly enter the market-place is symptomatic of this withdrawal. Valentine includes among these activities ‘the representation of the “mythical” attributes of power and authority through which the cultural experience of nation, community and state are bound together.’ Yet these mythical attributes are the very things that museums were once charged with celebrating in the museum. This withdrawal of government then has not surprisingly found a parallel in the deconstruction of these myths in the new museum, as in the NMA. This withdrawal, Valentine says, ‘gives rise to new patterns of interaction between politics and society, and, within this, between politics and culture as the social contributions of culture are themselves transformed.’ This is found in not just the exhibitionary statements of the museum but also in its revised practices of entrepreneurial management. Governance, through diverse organisations and activities, is replacing government, and one of the ways this is occurring is through a managerialist discourse. The language of managerialism inscribes itself on many activities and practices, including those of the museum.

This managerialisation, then, in which generic management practices (risk-taking, mobility, flexibility, quantitative, as opposed to qualitative, assessment, within an economic bottom line) can be applied to any range of practices, and is central to new patterns of cultural governance. It is predicated on the idea that culture contributes to economic productivity, so cultural and commercial discourses are intimately linked. In terms of public sector institutions in Australia, managerialism tends to assume that their problems are symptomatic of poor management or a lack of focus on the bottom line. The belief is promulgated that only the private sector really understands business. It imports commercial business principles and skills into public sector management, believing, for example, that these skills are not already held in cultural organisations, such as museums. Des Griffin, ex-director of the Australian Museum in Sydney, and co-writers, Abraham and

29 ibid.
Crawford, have noted that ‘the role of the Chief Executive has been redefined as financial management, fundraising, and entrepreneurship. As already noted, people with business skills from the for-profit sector have been recruited to museum boards. Staff size has declined through downsizing and restructuring. Corporate (strategic) planning, three to five-year budgeting, outsourcing and fixed term contract employment have all become more common, sometimes in response to declining funds.'

In response to the business challenge, governments across Australia have introduced full accrual accounting (essentially based on financial commitments rather than cash expenditure, and based on the practices in business enterprises), and have established new systems of evaluation that encourage more quantitative than qualitative criteria.

As observer Michael Darcy has commented ‘management is a discourse about the rational pursuit of efficiency – but its rationality is divorced from questions of politics or social value, allowing the emergence of “content-free” management – the replacement of substance with technique.’ It could even be seen in the managerial terminology used in the NMA when Dawn Casey, prior to opening, renamed curatorial staff ‘content developers’ – at once retracting a traditional professional identity at the same time as making their work part of a generic processing of information. Darcy identified a shift to an economic management model, saying ‘the rationale for management is that it removes value decisions to the rightful stakeholders (shareholders, or in public agencies, elected officials and ultimately voters) by taking away the obfuscatory power of experts, and specialists in the bureaucracy.’ This is also what occurred in the National Museum when members of Council rejected the interpretations of curators, and, under the

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31 There has also been considerable discussion about listing heritage objects, places and facilities as ‘assets’, which can therefore theoretically be realised or sold, financially valued, or written off. Attempts have been made to list these ‘assets’ as part of capital budgets, even though they are generally held in perpetuity for the ‘public good’.
33 ibid.
influence of the current political climate, placed the debate in the realm of political power. This ultimately resulted in the Review taking place under the threat of funding cuts and the loss of the incumbent Director.

Management discourse controls by using new systems of evaluation, now widely inserted around Australia in cultural organisations. Performance Indicators (PIs) are now standard measurement methods in the public sector. Established to measure efficiency and performance (not in itself at all unreasonable) they reduce judgement to quantifiable rather than qualitative indicators. For museums, this translates generally to numbers of visitors, outward loans from the collection, revenue earned, and programs delivered. While this may indicate the amount of activity undertaken, it offers little judgement of the effectiveness of the museum. Did all the visitors have a quality experience? And what would ‘a quality experience’ consist of? In the NGA, Brian Kennedy had rightly pointed to the need for qualitative assessment, stating categorically that ‘we...prefer to measure our successes in experiential terms, such as how memorable they are, or how intriguing, innovative, thought-provoking, diverse, traditional, curious, inspiring...the performance reporting regime with which we comply as an organisation tells only one part of the story of our activities.’

This sort of reporting cannot be measured. However, the need for the NGA to position itself in a marketplace obviates the efforts to divert attention from quantitative criteria for evaluation.

In addition, managerialism, using language like ‘enabling’, ‘empowering’, ‘enhancing’, ‘maximising’, ‘accessibility’ and ‘relevance’, signals an interest in individual aspirations and creates an image of a situation we might all aspire to. It encourages self-regulation in the sense that we identify personally with the outcomes and take them on as our own. This language is used frequently in museum policy and reporting documents when identifying aspirations of the new museology. For instance, in 1999 the National Gallery sought to

'enhance the community’s understanding and enjoyment of the visual arts’, and ‘provides access to works of art’ while in 2003 the National Museum is ‘committed to sharing and communicating knowledge’ and ‘is engaging with its audiences’. This pro-active language, expressing what are, of course, admirable ambitions, also immediately locates museum staff within managerialist directives, through self-regulation.

In Australia, managerialism was first taken up strongly by the Victorian Liberal State Government under Premier Jeff Kennett. From 1992 until 1997, the Kennett Government undertook a thorough conversion of the Victorian public sector. Aimed to bring finances under control, it inevitably involved a revision of management practices towards a managerial model. Private sector methods, commercial attitudes, increased competition, measurable standards for performance and a market sensibility were introduced. CEOs gained greater managerial authority, and consumers had a larger voice. Professional judgement was more contestable, unable to compete with the numerical/accounting logic of new management, which was applied to a wide range of diverse practices. Public museums were briefly forced to participate in compulsory competitive tendering, which meant they had to compete with the private sector and prove that they could offer museum services at more competitive prices and with greater efficiency than the private sector. This experiment failed because, as hitherto non-profit organisations, there was really no-one to tender against them.

According to a 1998 analysis by Spencer Zifcak, Associate Professor of Law at La Trobe University, speaking on management at a conference in Brasilia,
‘the very structures, systems and methodologies...set in place have tended to
impoverish political and administrative discussion’. He declared that
managerialism has established new relationships of power, relationships
which privilege enumerative logic over personal or interpersonal experience.
Dialogue and deliberation appear to have been an incidental casualty of this
new colonisation. In fact, according to Zifcak, ‘politically mandated
objectives’ encourage the avoidance of discussion and administrative
fairness – policy and service delivery are strategically separated, yet in
practice they are interconnected. Zifcak quotes the former Secretary of the
Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, Ken Baxter, as arguing that
‘the disciplines of the market place should replace the pressures exerted by
partisan interest groups’ and uses the example of someone on a hospital
waiting list – is their placement on the list a matter of ministerial policy or
hospital management? Each side can blame the other for failures of the
system. As Zifcak notes, ‘the lines of political accountability therefore
become very blurred.’ In other words, public service may be over-ridden by
market forces, and rational public debate is either missing or devalued.

The Victorian State experiment appears to have been an important example
for the Howard Liberal Government which came into power in 1996, and
managerialism became an increasingly strong feature of public sector
management (sometimes known as the New Public Management) in the

39 Zifcak, S., 1998, ‘From administrative reform to democratic reformation: accountability
in a post-managerial era. An Australian case study.’ Seminario Internacional. A Reforma
40 ibid., p. 8.
41 ibid., p. 12.
42 Ken Baxter, quoted in Zifcak, ibid., p. 15.
43 ibid., p. 15.
Melbourne University Press.
45 See Aulich, Chris, 2000, ‘Privatisation and contracting out’ in Singleton, Gwynneth (ed.),
Sydney, University of NSW Press, pp. 162 – 173; and Halligan, John, 2000, ‘Public service
reform under Howard’ in Singleton, Gwynneth (ed.), 2002, The Howard Government:
49 – 64.
Commonwealth, affecting national institutions and having a trickle-down
effect on other states as a result of policy and funding formulas.46

For museums there are several new circumstances that make managerialist
solutions attractive: the costs of running ever more expensive landmark
buildings; increased insurance costs for loan exhibitions in the context of a
bullish art market; and program costs rising in the efforts to accommodate
greater demand for services. One tendency has been to respond by shaving
off a little everywhere, from both staff and programs, creating greater loads
on remaining staff and less capacity to fulfil missions in exhibitions,
conservation and collections management, education or research. The NGA,
and NMA, like many other Australian museums, have had to introduce cuts
over recent years.

Another trend, often undertaken in tandem with shaving budgets is to
pursue increased attendances, especially through staging blockbuster
exhibitions (the NGA, as discussed in chapter five, has had a regular series
since Betty Churcher’s time, and the NMA began, in 2001, with the concept
of user-pays blockbuster exhibitions as a means to add to revenue). Of
course, blockbusters are very expensive to develop and usually need the
support of business sponsors who are generally happy to receive the acclaim
and aura associated with high profile and safe exhibitions, but are usually less
interested in supporting behind the scenes activities. There are occasional
exceptions to this however, such as the Gordon Darling Foundation that
supports two-year contracts to employ a young curator in Australian Prints
at the NGA.

More commonly, sponsors names are linked to major exhibition titles and
their accompanying elite social events that allow company executives to
network with politicians and senior public servants. This does not just
happen in Canberra. For example, in Darwin, MAGNT uses the annual

46 See Miranda, Melville, n.d., ‘Rethinking new public management: Community
development jobs and practices in Australia’ at
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Art Award, with major Telstra sponsorship, to facilitate business and political networks.\textsuperscript{47} Entrepreneurial activity, such as venue hire, bookshops, cafes and product development, is now standard practice for most museums, even the smallest. Shopping, commerce, and branding are as much a part of today's museum as its exhibitions and collections.\textsuperscript{48} The desire may be to pursue the recognition of the museum as a social institution and to make qualitative evaluations of its success in terms of the public good, but the bottom line is equally fiscal accountability and numerically measurable results.\textsuperscript{49} These are difficult pursuits to reconcile when they require different internal attitudes and processes.

The question then arises about how the museum, purporting to encourage dialogue, can negotiate this rather Janus-faced system? In management terms, dialogue is a burden for, or an impediment to, the real task of meeting economic and government objectives. Can the museum, operating under managerialist principles in its own organisational processes, then promote debate, the forum, in its programs? Structurally embedded in the everyday workings of the museum, managerialism becomes almost like another master narrative – informing the work, but largely unacknowledged as the frame for organisational thinking. Curators at the public face of the museum may produce exhibitions, acquire objects, and use interpretations that purport to encourage debate, but managerialist aims will over-write those of dialogue. Value structures in the organisation have effectively changed and there will inevitably be ongoing conflict between the aims and objectives of museum professionals and management's guardianship over the rhetoric of public debate, protecting, as it is, the relationship with public and private sponsors.

\textsuperscript{47} 2003, Anna Małgorzewicz, interview with author, 9 November.
\textsuperscript{49} See for example the annual reports of the National Gallery of Australia, for instance, 1999, National Gallery of Australia Annual Report 1998 – 99, Canberra, NGA, p. 26 – 'The National Gallery Shop and specialist shops established for major exhibitions continue to have a significant role in generating revenue to support the National Gallery's programs. These shops also play a part in enhancing the visitor's experience of the National Gallery, its collections and its programs, by extending awareness of the collection and sustaining contact long after a visit.'
The MAGNT is a case in point which is worth outlining briefly. It was opened in 1970 as the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Darwin’s Old Town Hall building, and with a small staff. After the building was devastated by Cyclone Tracy in 1974, it existed without a home for seven years until a permanent building was constructed at Darwin’s Bullocky Point. It had a brief to collect and exhibit Northern Territory history and art, especially Indigenous art, and under the inaugural Director Colin Jack-Hinton, the concept also grew to include natural sciences, which is now a significant part of the museum. By the time Jack-Hinton retired in 1992 there were 100 staff and a fully multi-disciplinary curatorial program. Subsequently, new Director Jacqueline Healy (appointed in 1993) renamed the institution The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, corporatised it, gave it a new mission (‘making sense of our world’) and established new strategic directions and business plans in an effort to consolidate its professional standards. Unfortunately she was also beset by occupational health and safety issues and a situation in which she and her Assistant Director were unable to work together (a situation that ended in the Supreme Court).

Despite what should have been simply an issue of a renegotiation of working relationships between staff, the NT Chief Minister’s department intervened, creating a new Department of Arts and Museums with responsibility for the MAGNT. The Museum’s statutory authority was removed and the Director now had to report to the Chief Executive of the New Department, who established her office (and soon co-located departmental staff there too) in the museum building. When the Director, who no longer had any delegated financial authority, did not give up her own office accommodation, the Chief

Executive took over the adjacent Board Room and began to actually advise and direct staff. The 1997 recurrent budget of initially $8 million was reduced to $3.9 million and 30 of the 100 staff positions disappeared. Attempts to work within the new budget resulted in the cancelling of programs, a moratorium on acquisitions, and staff vacancies left unfilled. The Director, completely demoralised (and despite being voted NT Telstra Business Woman of the Year in 1995 in recognition of the standard of excellence achieved at MAGNT in the previous two years), resigned and a new Assistant Director acted in the job for a few months.

The following Director, Patrick Filmer-Sankey, a natural scientist, remained for eighteen months, but he too was reportedly demoralised and found it difficult to work within the new structure with no delegated authority and essentially no identity within the official chain of command. He too resigned, but before his departure, publicly complained in an ABC radio interview of bureaucratic interference (for example, MAGNT was instructed to develop exhibitions by government without previous consultation – the museum even learned about one through the media). He was, unsurprisingly, immediately stood down by the Chief Executive of the Department with a breach of code of conduct and ordered to leave the building immediately. In a subsequent ABC radio interview with then Chief Minister Denis Burke, Filmer-Sankey and Claire Martin (later to become Chief Minister), Burke said: 'Well I know he said something about there should be a separation of power between arts and museums and the politicians. Well, sorry. He’s paid to carry out government directives.'

When its statutory authority was removed and the bureaucracy moved in, the resulting management surveillance had little to do with the aims and

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52 2003, Interview with Anna Malgorzewicz, 9 November.
53 Filmer-Sankey, Patrick, 2000, ABC Radio Transcript, PM Archive, Thursday 12 October
54 Burke, Denis, 2000, ABC Radio Transcript, PM Archive, Thursday 12 October.
objectives of the museum, but represented an attempt to rein in the museum’s independence and control it by enforcing stricter adherence to managerial methods. The controlling bureaucracy and government began to make their own independent choices of exhibitions and did not consult on many day to day issues, including the allocation of resources to museum functions. The reduction of dialogue produced by managerialism is in direct conflict with the aims of the new museology. The capacity of a museum to control (along with its governing board) its own curatorial and exhibitionary statements directly affects its relationship with its publics. A curator tied to government directives cannot have an open dialogue with members of the public with an interest in the statements of the museum. In the case of MAGNT, this was not just an issue of managerial interference in the organisational structure of the Museum but a disabling of its capacity to establish a program that met its museological mission.

Are there models for how dialogue might be achieved? Information technology has revealed new pathways to the uses and understanding of knowledge and has the capacity to create very different power relationships. Might these be new paradigms for the museum?

**Communication and the virtual museum**

Museums and multi-media, including the use of the World Wide Web, have opened up new ways of relating to and communicating with audiences (visitors and non-visitors alike). Commerce has translated easily onto the Web and allows access to a broader range of consumers than ever before. New sources of revenue are part of the Web interface (shopping, on-line bookings, requests for reproduction rights are examples), as is the imperative of new modes of advertising, including attracting visitors from interstate and overseas. Managerial, commercial and legal considerations at present govern many museum web sites. Questions about the ownership of intellectual property rights and reproduction rights (copyright) result in some institutions limiting access to images, or information, or using embedded watermarks in images to prevent unauthorised uses. Museums are as much commercial
resources as intellectual ones. But in the light of the quest for the ‘museum as forum’ the Web also opens up new possibilities for exchange and engagement, not yet often taken up by museums.

Museums use objects as the focus of knowledge and experience. They are seen as sites of authenticity – the real object or artefact is presented as a source of truth, a tangible piece of evidence, or, in the case of art, as unique and, in some ways, self-sufficient. It is not unusual then for the virtual museum to be seen as less authentic, a distortion. Like Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the loss of aura\(^5\), the virtual museum could be identified as a lesser reproduction, a faded copy of the better original. Yet digital technology has changed image reproduction. The quality of a digital copy can be equal to the original and the thousandth copy is just as good as the first. Equally, it has been argued that the museum itself has already distorted objects within it through its own frameworks (curatorial and architectural).\(^5\)

“...The integration of objects into museum collections removes and alienates the object from its “authentic” (original, historical, physical, emotional) context and places it in a new and virtual “museum order”...Of course, there is a difference between real objects displayed in an on-site museum and their virtual reproductions in an online environment. But the dichotomy between real and virtual is misleading and obscures their commonalities, simplifying the multiple meanings objects acquire through cultural history.”\(^5\)

The virtual realm raises issues for museums that make it timely to rethink museum communication and relationships within and beyond the museum.


\(^{56}\) Leppert, Richard, 1996, \textit{Art and the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery}, Boulder, Colorado, Westview/Harper Collins. Leppert argues that the perception of works of art is institutionally framed and that these frames construct meanings that are not neutral.

At its most basic, the virtual museum may be understood as an information technology duplication of the physical museum—a museum in cyberspace. In most instances, however, this is rarely what is found on museum websites. The website of the National Gallery of Australia, for example, offers information about exhibition calendars, programs of events, access to collection data (with limitations), background information about the organisation, including corporate documents, staff contacts, members' programs, shopping services, keyword searching in the collection and research library catalogues, media releases, and speeches by the director. Highlights of exhibitions, by way of an image, short information texts, introductory essays by curators and associated program information, give the website visitor a taste of what may be found at the physical site of the museum. It is not presented as an alternative to an actual visit to the gallery building, but instead provides information to assist before or after visits, or to aid in making contact with staff. Education assistance (for example, for teachers and students) operates in a similar manner, with information on education services and activities and the provision of teachers' notes on specific recent exhibitions. Links are available to other sites, such as Australian Museums On-Line (AMOL). A collaborative project launched in 1996, AMOL was a website that provides a gateway to Australian museum and gallery collections, listing (with images) hundreds of thousands of collection items from over 1100 Australian institutions. In October 2005 AMOL was replaced by the expanded Collections Australia Network (CAN) site. On the NGA site there is a feedback form to give visitors the chance to comment on services and enable improvement. A straightforward email

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59 www.nga.gov.au/Home/index.cfm
60 AMOL was a collaborative project between Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and the museum sector. It was an initiative of the Cultural Ministers Council (run through the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts) and the former Cultural Ministers Council Heritage Collections Committee.
61 AMOL has essentially changed its name to Collections Australia Network (CAN) and will now incorporate all not-for-profit public access collecting organizations in all sectors, not just museums and galleries. Libraries and archives, will be included and CAN services will focus particularly on small and medium collecting institutions in regional areas. See www.collectionsaustralia.net/
format, it does not offer real-time engagement with museum staff. The site is extensive, relatively easy to navigate, and presents information in a fairly lucid manner. Yet, it has limitations.

The NGA web site does what many museum sites over the world do.\(^6^2\) It orders information in a linear and hierarchical format. Collections information is essentially derived from its existing collections management systems. Data, such as artist, media, title, date, style or period are descriptors used in museum registration systems, identifying individual objects, assisting both a logical art historical set of categories and a physical storage retrieval system. In other words, it is based on the needs of museum staff in carrying out their day-to-day work, managing and documenting physical assets. Collection records are more about objects as 'things' and not focussed on meaning, connections or ideas represented in or by the object. In this approach, curatorial control over the information is central. It is curators, as cultural mediators, who select, write and order the information, and choose possible hyperlinks. Searches are undertaken using keywords, from art historical categories, not dissimilar to a library catalogue. The information obtained is thus retrieved from pre-set pathways\(^6^3\) and wide-ranging browsing is not enabled. The information remains in a form that may limit its usefulness to outside users. The ultimate effect of this is that the NGA retains its authority over the information provided. It fits a modernist model of the museum in which information is transferred 'from an authoritative source to an uninformed receiver'\(^6^4\) – knowledge as part of a grand narrative, linear and one-way. In this model, the same 'framing' devices of the physical site, like the linear hang of paintings on a wall, are repeated in the virtual site.

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\(^6^2\) See for example the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC at \[www.nga.gov\] (which includes virtual tours of selected exhibitions and aspects of the collection); the Louvre, Paris, at \[http://www.louvre.fr/liv/commun/home_flash.jsp?bmLocale=en\]; or the Tate Gallery, London at \[http://www.tate.org.uk/\].


But what about new relationships, communication and collaborations so often talked in the new museology? Is the virtual museum a place where the social and civic role of the museum no longer applies? In fact, the virtual museum can offer opportunities not available in the physical site. Even 3D imaging can offer a visual exploration not available in glass cases or behind physical barriers. Most significantly, new voices and new pluralist narratives have been introduced into museum collections and exhibitions, creating new connections and varying relationships. Australian museum researcher Fiona Cameron says that 'digital technologies have the potential to rewrite the meaning and significance of collections. By promoting polysemic (plural) models for interpreting collections, for instance, they bring into question absolute claims about meaning, enabling alternative and sometimes conflicting interpretations to appear.65 Post-modern knowledge is theorised as networked and multiple, instead of hierarchical and linear66, and in this spirit the virtual museum has the capacity to offer endless choices that may be determined by the user rather than the museum.

The National Museum of Australia’s website,67 has, until now, been a much expanded version of the style employed by the National Gallery. However, from 2004, the NMA has been developing a prototype for a new, more user-centred site. As NMA web site developers have declared, ‘if museums are in the knowledge business, we need to think not just about the information, but also about the people using it. We need to re-examine the nature of our data and the interfaces that present it as systems for creating meaning, not just disseminating information.’68 They refer to creating ‘tools that allow users to

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67 www.nma.gov.au/

manipulate, analyse, annotate and comment and, in so doing, define and create on-line communities.\textsuperscript{69} To do so, they have created a web interface called the History Browser which links the NMA's collection management data-base (with additional categories) to their web system, enabling 'relevance relationships' and 'an insight into the context and stories behind the collection item whilst encouraging further exploration of these relationships through a range of source material'.\textsuperscript{70} Users will be able to save favourite items into a personal 'gallery', forward items via email, and engage in on-line discussion about collection items with curators and members of the public. Perhaps this might also be taken further to include on-line discussion of exhibitions, events and media debate? Users will be able to access multiple routes and associations to follow their own interests and personalise the way they use the virtual NMA site. This is certainly living up to the rhetoric of plural interests and voices in all NMA programs.

Other museums have not had the same access to either the funds to pursue the possibilities of web-based communication or the administrative commitment. For The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, its web site is embedded within the public service bureaucracy, as part of the Northern Territory Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs site\textsuperscript{71} – indicative of the strong controls still exerted over it by its bureaucratic and political masters. Web management is undertaken by the Department and not by MAGNT itself and the information on the site is limited and linear. Basic information (some corporate data, access details, calendars of events and some research publications) is available, but there are no current opportunities for collection searches (though this is gradually being addressed), let alone more user-manipulated enquiries or interactive communication. The loss of its statutory status continues to hinder MAGNT's ability to engage in multiple and various ways with its audience.

\textsuperscript{69} ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} www.dcdsca.nt.gov.au/
Financial limitations are a significant obstacle for the Pioneer Women’s Hut though it does have a web site, albeit through AMOL and the Heritage Collections Council, for its Quilt Register. Here, the stories of the quilts and their makers are recorded, providing a research resource for families, scholars and others interested in the every-day domestics arts of Australian women. It provides a contact point for an otherwise geographically isolated site, bringing one of the activities of the PWH to a wider audience. Unable to achieve this on its own as an unfunded institution, the PWH has collaborated with AMOL and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney to create this site. This is one of the great opportunities offered by the web – the collaboration with and assistance of larger museums and peak bodies can enhance opportunities and engage multiple networks. This has not yet been taken up to the fullest extent in Australia, though AMOL is a significant initiative.

Museum web sites have the potential to be about more than opening up public access to collections data. Potentially they are opportunities for diverse users to explore the complexities of collections and of museums as institutions of cultural memory and sites of cultural authority. In terms of the cultural public sphere they offer one of the best opportunities to collaborate with visitors through the exchange of information, of stories, of responses to objects and ideas. Multidisciplinary angles, unexpected discoveries and new connectivities could produce new ways of understanding the work of the museum. The virtual museum can facilitate alternative contexts, or frames, for understanding items in collections. Multiple pathways are not only methods for enriched and individualised uses of information but can open up interactive communication, in real or delayed time, that means the museum is in dialogue and partnership with its various communities. The flexibility and scope of information technology may make the possibilities for fully engaged dialogue in museums more readily available than the limited interconnections currently possible in a physical site – at least while exhibitions continue to be presented in linear, modernist formats. Inevitably,

meanings and interpretations will increase in variety and complexity and expose the museum to expanded, rigorous and creative conceptions of culture and history. The possibilities of the virtual museum have the capacity to model ways of using collections and knowledge that may signal new directions for the physical museum.

Still, the museum remains a privileged place, circumscribed by specialist knowledge and ways of working. Specialist disciplines have created their own efficiencies in structuring museum practices and it is useful to investigate how these can restrict the capacity to work in interdisciplinary and collaborative ways.

**Scholarly disciplines and professional orthodoxies**

Once defined by their relationships to objects, museums now increasingly try to define themselves by their relationships with visitors. Rather than reproducing social and cultural inequalities, museums are being encouraged to be more open and accessible. Education and scholarship are not the only mission of the museum. They also have a new leisure role and see themselves as social enterprises. Visitors are being encouraged to make their own uses of museums, independent of the uses made available by curators. Museum practices are being challenged to be more democratic and the roles of professional staff are among those under examination.

There was a period of time when some museums in Australia tried to effect changes in thinking about specialist staff roles by renaming jobs in an attempt to broaden the capacity to work across borders. For example, as previously mentioned, in 1998 the NMA dropped the title curator and renamed these positions ‘content-developers’. Similarly, in the early to mid 1990s, Museum Victoria (the State museum of Victoria), employing artists to work as part of exhibition development teams, preferred to call them
`creative producers'. Neither change has lasted. Apart from creating further confusion in conventional understandings of what their roles entailed, the names seemed curious euphemisms for staff continuing to do what they had always done, though now engaged in a more team-based environment.

Nevertheless, attempts were being made to rethink how museum work could be done, especially in the context of "empowering" a greater range of staff to contribute to the creative development of ideas and projects. The dominant curatorial, discipline-based culture of museum organisations was being brought into question, as were the power relationships that they engendered. This questioning was part of the reflexive character of refreshed museum missions and the desire for partnerships, both within and outside the museum. It is notable however that this has also occurred in a period of increasing managerialism, effecting a kind of disciplining of museum professionals by reducing their independence and singular authority. Management analyst Craig Pritchard calls this a process of making the specialist "proletarianised labour" rather than "professional artisan" and that it results in "conflict between managerial and professional paradigms."

Curatorial judgement is being questioned. It is influenced by public opinion, both directly and through management, it is being restrained by government, it is sometimes shaped by the influence of sponsors (most often through self-censorship), and curators are questioning their own ethical standards. The authority of the museum, and its curatorial expertise, is no longer unexamined. The museum is only one participant in the forming of public opinion but, as the influential US museologist Stephen Weil conjectured, the museum can use its communicative capacities to support its communities, its

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73 Malgorzewicz, Anna, Director, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 2003, interview with author, 9 November – Anna Malgorzewicz was previously Director if the Immigration Museum, Melbourne, which is part of Museum Victoria and used ‘creative producers’ (artists) in the museum.

publics, to pursue common goals. The museum can provide a space for discussion of ideas and common goals, as well as of differences, but it is also constrained by the many influences which operate upon it, especially if it is a government controlled museum.

In the National Museum at opening in 2001, there was something of a paradigm shift in curatorial practice. As discussed in chapter two, instead of using traditional categories to link curators with collections, the whole museum (largely due to the recommendations of the Pigott Report) was organised into thematic areas – Land, Nation and People. Curatorial teams worked with the various themes, crossing disciplinary boundaries and exchanging ideas, not only with each other but also with a wide range of partners outside the museum. Historians, environmental scientists, and anthropologists were able to work together to explore human relationships to land, going from 'deep time' in geological terms to the present. The permanent exhibition 'Tangled Destinies', is an example where this cross-disciplinary approach revealed the complexities of land and human relationships, both pre- and post-settlement.

For the art museum, the role of the specialist is particularly vexed. As anthropologist Christina Kreps points out, object- or people-focusses are orientations that 'are not mutually exclusive...what we need is an approach to curatorial work that recognizes the interplay of objects, people and societies, and expresses these relationships in social and cultural contexts.' The independence of art (and by extension, the focus on the independent object in the art museum) brings up a paradox for the centrality of art history in the art museum. Theorist Jorge Ribalta, writing on cultural policy, identified that 'a “disinterested” defence of art (an apolitical or pre-political defence of art) in the name of freedom and individuality is by its very nature “interested” (is, therefore, political) in that it is based upon a conception of

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freedom and autonomy that can only apply in specific historical and political circumstances.\textsuperscript{77} It is paradoxical in Australia, given the interference by government in the activities of cultural institutions such as museums, that the National Gallery is, on the one hand, ‘encouraged’ to drop an exhibition like \textit{Sensation} or to create multiple opportunities for shopping in the museum, while on the other, its right to maintain the sanctity of art’s independence is defended by that same governmental system. In other words, art in the museum already exists in a public sphere that is not removed from politics, but is in fact supported by it. Thus, what possibilities are there for a paradigm shift in the curatorial practices of the art museum?

One possibility is to explore the idea of visual studies\textsuperscript{78} – a way of analysing visual images that rejects the kind of hierarchy of values (including aesthetics and connoisseurship) of art history. Like cultural studies, it implies a de-hierarchisation of cultural values, using a kind of ‘anthropological’ approach to culture. This may entail addressing the historical valuation of one kind of image (high or fine art) against other images from outside art, such as film and television, advertising or graphic design. Methodologically it would necessitate erasing the distinctions between them i.e. you would have to address popular and high culture in a similar way – like comparing reality TV and eighteenth century etchings, which, while products of different aesthetic, professional and cultural milieus, may still share certain approaches to, say, subject matter or social commentary. In this sense it is possible to see the art museum as a kind of anachronism. Given that art is a particular valorisation of a culture, perhaps we should be talking about it ‘anthropologically’. This is not to deny any value hierarchy between ‘art’ and other images, when it is, after all, also dependent on their movement or circulation in various cultural spheres. The historiography of the notion of ‘art’ however reveals that in the


eighteenth century, with the development of aesthetics, the concept of art became privileged, and this remains the primary message of the art museum.  

Yet social history museums are also based on hierarchical systems of values. Although the discipline of social history is itself a critique of other forms of history, in the museum it also becomes subservient to the logic of classification and object management that itself creates new forms of meaning.

Conclusion

Essentially, in the midst of attempts to shift the boundaries of museum practice and open it up to the debates of the public sphere, new pressures have been brought to bear on the museum. Managerialism, commercial imperatives and the limits of professional orthodoxies compete in a range of ways with new interests in dialogue and collaboration, open communication and the acceptance of complexity and divergent views, making efforts to introduce new methodologies very difficult.

The canons of the art museum, however stretched to accommodate increasingly diverse approaches to art, have not shifted. They cannot be redefined without some losses and changes in the system of valuation. Until that occurs, the art museum will continue to distance itself from public dialogue. Similarly, managerialism effectively reduces the independence and authority of museum professionals, whose role is already questioned and reassessed by shifts in museological values. Commercial interests and managerial principles now intersect with the museum, further affecting its ability to freely participate in the cultural public sphere. Government withdrawal from some of its previous roles in the belief that market forces

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operate to benefit society produces competing philosophies in the new museum that are difficult to reconcile. New technologies and the World Wide Web have enabled both new sources of commerce and new possibilities for the museum as forum through initiatives such as on-line discussion. Yet currently, museum sites tend to reproduce the paradigms of their institution, maintaining hierarchical systems of information and offering little capacity for change, though the NMA’s proposed History Browser may yet offer new ways to define and create on-line communities.

The new museology focuses on the broad needs of museum audiences (as I indicated in my Introduction I have chosen to focus on the rhetoric of this relationship and not the analysis and surveys of audience development) and on establishing new relationships with communities including partnerships and collaborations, but the government-run museum can find itself in a quandary with erosions of its ability to act freely in repositioning itself with its publics, its communities. The question then becomes whom does the museum serve? If a museum is a government initiative and funded by government, it faces a dilemma about whether its constituency is its current political masters or the wider community to whom government itself is theoretically and ostensibly practically subject. This is a question facing many museums, including the NMA and the NGA.
Conclusion

The 'museum as forum' as a mode of engagement with the public sphere

If museums are going to take an important role in the development of social thinking then I would argue one of the key roles for museums is to be tenaciously subversive. Museums with their status of authority are well placed to question our accepted wisdoms and to challenge some of our beliefs and attitudes. But perhaps more importantly museums can encourage the development of active and enquiring minds that will always interrogate the information that daily confronts and bombards us through the print and electronic media. Social change takes place when people are informed and care enough about the issues. I think we in museums have a responsibility to assist in this process. Viv Szekeres, Changing Headsets: The impact of museums on social thinking, 2005 Australia-Israel Hawke lecture

...what is an art museum if not a collection of meditations on life, death, sex, drugs, sadness, laughter, innocence, inequality, poverty, anger, and god? And doesn’t everyone have some wisdom in these things, and doesn’t everyone deserve the opportunity to learn more about these things on their own terms, at their own pace, for their own reasons and in their own language? John Cross, 2003, Packing Away the Velvet Rope: The art museum as a site for adult learning, Art Museums: Sites of Communication Conference

At the beginning of this dissertation I declared a personal interest in the social experience of the museum and the power it can have to either welcome or deter potential visitors. As I began working in museums myself (both art and social history museums) I became interested in the need for a more open and engaged museology that could address diverse audiences and incorporate their experiences and stories (their own wisdom) within the museum. In this thesis I investigated the changing rhetoric of museums in Australia and its expression in new policies and mission statements. In particular I was concerned with the new interest in museums having a role in
the development of social thinking, being part of an active public sphere, one in which informed discourse or debate on important issues of the day could be fostered — the museum as forum. I selected the National Gallery of Australia and the National Museum of Australia as my major case studies, not because of their national status, but rather because each represented what was considered peak practice for Australian museums at the time they opened. In this sense their development and histories, their policies and interface with the public sphere, could be said to chart a significant shift in both museological thought and practice in Australia. Both museums have employed the concept of the forum as a mode of engaging with their communities, though each has responded very differently in practice.

In looking at the public nature of the museum, through the lens of the public sphere, I have drawn on the work of Jürgen Habermas, particularly in his two volume *Theory of Communicative Action*. Though based on an idealised vision of the public sphere, Habermas’s work has allowed me to see that the museum is forced to negotiate between two worlds — the system and the lifeworld, representing in turn the interests of government, bureaucracy and the capitalist economy, and the world of the everyday incorporating the interests of individuals and their moral and ethical concerns. In practice, the system world ultimately controls the museum, as can be seen in government responses to controversial exhibitions (such as *Sensation* at the NGA or the social history focus of the first permanent exhibitions at the NMA), or its insistence on entrepreneurial activity, including sponsorships, that are potentially at odds with museum missions and result, if not in overt censorship, at least in self-censorship by museum staff. By using the work of Michel de Certeau, whose analysis of systems of disciplinary enclosure asserted that it produced passive, processed publics, I was able to investigate effects of disciplinary narratives on the imagining of museum publics and to explore the links between the continued authoritative power of these disciplinary boundaries and the capacity of the museum to incorporate debate and controversy. Following Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybrid spaces in which multiple cultural identities are possible, I have identified that in the NGA the grand narratives of art history have absorbed plural identities but
have continued to incorporate them within national categories rather than exploring any breakdown of these categories. Alternatively, in the NMA, the identification of cultural difference has, in some instances, questioned the myth of a singular Australian identity and resulted in an explosion of debate in the public sphere about who and what is represented in the museum.

In chapters one and two I introduced the two primary case studies and showed their origins in different understandings of the nation, culture and history. The National Gallery was established as a showcase of Australian and International art, an authority on standards of artistic achievement and a place to witness these cultural high points. The National Museum’s origins lay in the acknowledgement of conflicting views of history and the nation, and in the recognition of a larger concept of Australia as a continent, with an extensive Indigenous presence that deserved greater attention. This recognition included a need to no longer gloss over the devastating effects of European contact with Australia’s Indigenous peoples, and to promote new knowledge and understanding of this part of our history. As a consequence of revealing new aspects of our history, there was to be no recoiling from controversy, but instead an engagement with it, and a commitment to the participation of communities in the construction, presentation and interpretation of that history. I identified government attitudes to the establishment of these two museums and how particular issues such as the perception of a need for economic restraint in cultural expenditure, the impact of economic rationalism and the increasing demand by successive governments for revenue-generation began to make their impact on them.

Chapter three addressed the shifts in museum philosophies between the opening of the NGA and that of the NMA and documented the critiques of museum practices. Here I incorporated examples of new museological approaches in Australia and how public statements in exhibitions and collections were drawing on, for example, social history and contemporary political themes, and a questioning of the hierarchical authority of the museum. I argued that a new emphasis on community and audiences had produced very different ways of using and interpreting objects, as can be
seen in the differences between two exhibitions of Indonesian textiles, one incorporating stories of cultural loss and revival, the other focusing on trade exchanges and stylistic influences.

A particular tension that emerged from my research was that of the acceptance and expression of Indigeneity in the museum. In chapter four I tracked the responses to Indigenous art and culture and argued that Indigeneity has become an important marker of Australian cultural identity and has enabled the museum to open up debate on the moral and ethical issues arising from Indigenous histories and cultures. In this arena the art museum led the way, and its celebration of Aboriginal art has played a part in fostering the economic independence of some Indigenous communities and has been the source of substantial self-esteem and pride in communities long denied a valued place in Australian society. Yet the example of the Aboriginal Memorial in the NGA also raised the issue of how an exclusively aesthetic framework can diminish a strongly political message. In chapters four and six I demonstrated that, in the NMA, Indigenous perspectives have been included and have attempted to alleviate Indigenous mistrust of museums, especially through oral testimony, the participation of communities in the development of exhibitions and the commitment to repatriation of human remains and sacred material acquired in the past.

In chapter five I attempted to show the continued need for art historical validation in the NGA and argued that the practices of the art museum, despite historical revisions and expansions of the canon, remain primarily concerned with the values of aesthetic excellence and connoisseurship. In addition I identified the commercial ventures and branding exercises of the Gallery that mitigated against the rhetoric of Director Dr Kennedy who invoked the forum as a model for Gallery activities at the same time as a desire to maintain the art museum as a contemplative temple.

Chapter six shifted the focus to the public debates around the opening of the NMA and the contestations over its interpretations of history and nation. In
particular I tracked the origins of the debates in the political appointments to the NMA Council and the public attacks by conservative historian Keith Windschuttle which were amplified by sections of the media. I argued that the new museology in the NMA had broached a number of taboos by revealing historic injustices and exposing past uses of power to subdue Australia's Indigenous peoples. It did this at the same time as employing a rational, measured account of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding while reducing the fear that comes from ignorance. I maintained that a feature of these debates was a real commitment on the NMA's part to participate in and facilitate further public discussion.

I then turned to a broad range of issues and influences in museums, some of which, I argue, limit the possibility of museums fully realising the desire to become the 'reinvented town square.' I found that identity is a major concern in museums, especially as they seek to be more inclusive and to represent those who were previously excluded as subjects of the museum. The grand narrative of art history has seamlessly absorbed diverse identities, without breaking down tropes of nation, while social history is more specifically targeted at exposing the complexity of social and cultural experience. One of the most significant limitations for the new museology is the model of the free market with its stress on the links between cultural and economic development and its desire to shift the cultural sector to a more entrepreneurial and commercial basis. This, I have demonstrated, has been accompanied by an emphasis on managerial competencies, overlaying specialist tasks with generic business skills. The pursuit of efficiency disregards the moral and ethical dimensions of museum missions, and impoverishes dialogue – the very target of the new museology.

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1 Nicholas Boonin, 2001, 'The future of museums', April
www.nicholasboonin.com/articles/museumfuture.pdf, no pagination
New technologies also raised questions about opportunities for both marketing and commerce, and new sites for dialogue in a cyber public sphere. Both the NMA and the NGA offer access to collections and exhibitions on their web sites and provide electronic copies of public documents such as annual reports and financial statements. Currently presented as hierarchical and fixed sources of information in both institutions, there is the possibility of using the web to allow multiple routes through a site and to establish self-directed dialogue rather than the authoritative and limited pathways now available. I contend that new flexible websites could potentially model new ways of enabling more flexible and individually-directed uses of the physical museum.

Similarly, I identified that as the work of museum staff has been increasingly professionalised and linked to specific forms of disciplinary education, it has also been questioned and examined, particularly attempting to replace the singular authority of the curator with collaborative partnerships with communities. I argued that managerialism is also operating to disempower the curator, overlaying the specialist work of the curator with the paradigm of generic management.

In the NMA curators often work in collaborative and cross-disciplinary teams, exploring broad perspectives through thematic approaches. In the NGA there is a continued focus on the independence of the art object which relies on the conventions of art historical analyses. I argue that, in addition to art history, it would be possible for the art museum to employ a visual studies approach which rejects the hierarchical distinctions between different forms of visual culture and allows the inclusion of diverse relationships and interpretations.

**Moving beyond the ‘new museology’**

As a whole this thesis points to the practical and political issues that the new museum faces in twenty-first century Australia. Essentially I maintain that
the new museology can only be partially realised in government-run museums, that the influence of embedded disciplinary discourses, government agendas, economic imperatives, and managerial priorities will continue to temper efforts at open and informed public dialogue. In large institutions like the NMA and the NGA the scale of the internal bureaucracy similarly mitigates against open dialogue between staff, let alone broader public engagement. The museum in Australia has to negotiate a balance, often precarious and not always successful, between the system and the lifeworld.

I believe this thesis makes a contribution to several areas of scholarship. Firstly, it adds to the calls for an examination of the practical effects of theoretical perspectives on the new museology which have emerged variously in the work of, for example, Tony Bennett, James Clifford, Andrea Witcomb, Ivan Gaskell, Stephen Bann, Danielle Rice, Stephen Weil, James Cuno and Richard Sandell.2 By examining the public statements of the museums, I have been able to show the differences between the rhetorical allegiance to new museological thinking and its practical realisation in the activities of these institutions. Secondly, the thesis expands upon the

knowledge of museum practice in Australia by the use of case studies which investigate a watershed period for Australian museums charting shifts in museological thinking. These case studies have examined museum efforts to contribute to and participate in the dialogues of a public sphere and show that Australian museums have responded in varying degrees to calls for increased openness and flexibility. They also reveal the differences between the disciplines of art and social history, which, I have argued, are already predicated on different relationships to audiences and thus vary in their ability, in the museum context, to be open to genuine dialogue. Thirdly, the thesis adds to the trend to a more critical examination of the new museology by identifying influences which in turn, support and sabotage efforts to be sites for democratic and informed debate. These have varied from the support of Indigenous communities and those finally given a voice in the museum, to the influence and sometimes direct interference from government, and the powerful effects of economic rationalism, commercialism and managerialism. Finally, the thesis explores the link between the museum and the public sphere in Australia as expressed in the new museology and offers a practical assessment of its theoretical base.

Possibilities for future research

The field of museum studies covers an extensive range of practical and theoretical issues, many of which remain to be comprehensively examined in the Australian context. This thesis has presented several lines of inquiry which warrant further exploration. While I have detailed several examples of government interference in Australian museums, a study of the history of governmental relationships with museums in Australia would offer valuable insights into the motivations of government support for museums and its expectations of the museum sector. Similarly, there is further work to be done on the effects of cultural policy on museums in Australia, especially in the area of regional economic development and cultural tourism. It would be fruitful to examine the nature of the museum profession in Australia, a diverse entity, and its development as a field of vocational study in
educational institutions. The effects of the professionalisation of museum work on the museum industry and on interpretations in museums would be a useful part of such an inquiry. While I have touched on the issue of governance of museums through their managing bodies (Trustees, Councils, Boards), for example in the case of the NMA Review, it has been beyond the scope of this thesis to pursue the ethical and structural complexities of such bodies. A valuable line of inquiry would be to examine the pressures, expectations and influences operating on these bodies from all stakeholders in museums – museum staff and Friends groups, government (both local, state, and Commonwealth), community groups, peak bodies, the media, academia and individuals. Similarly, this thesis has shown the powerful influence that can be exerted by the popular media, and while its implications were outside the focus of this thesis, it deserves serious further study.

The museum in Australia faces a complex future. It remains a site of cultural valuation and experience, though the revisions of the new museology have shifted the emphasis from authoritative knowledge to relationships between audiences, communities and individuals and their ever-shifting interpretations of the knowledge contained in the museum. The debates of the public sphere are integral to these relationships – they help us interrogate all the things we deal with in everyday life. What is any museum if not a collection of meditations on life itself – and an opportunity to debate these very meditations?
Appendix A

Selected survey of membership of Council for National Gallery of Australia and National Museum of Australia

National Gallery of Australia
- as listed in annual reports

As at 30 June 1982  
Mr L. Gordon Darling, C.M.G. *Chairman*  
Mr Marc Besen  
Mr Frederick Brice  
Mr John D. Davies  
Mr James O. Fairfax  
Mr James Mollison, *Director*  
Mr Robert W. Piper  
Professor Virginia Spate  
*Retirements effective from 31 December 1981*
  
Mr Murray Bail (3 June 1976 - 31 Dec. 1981)  
*Retirements effective from 2 June 1982*
  
Mr R.C. Crebbin (former Chairman) (3 June 1976 – 2 June 1982)  
Mr James Gleeson, A.M. (3 June 1976 – 2 June 1982)  

Mr Fred Williams, O.B.E. was a member of Council from 3 June 1976 until his death on 22 April 1982.

As at 30 June 1984  
L. Gordon Darling CMG *Chairman*  
John D. Davies *Deputy Chairman*  
Marc Besen  
Tom K. Critchley AO CBE  
Murray W. Elliott  
James O. Fairfax  
Jacqueline Hick  
James Mollison AM *Director*  
Lenore Nicklin  
Robert W. Piper  
Virginia Spate  
Robert McArthur Observer – Department of Home Affairs and Environment (appointed 1982/83 financial year)

As at 30 June 1987  
Mr L. Gordon Darling CMG *Chairman* (until 31.12.86)
Hon (Edward) Gough Whitlam, A.C, Q.C. *Chairman* (from 1.1.87)
Mr Marc Besen
Mr Thomas K. Critchley, AO, CBE (to 8.8.86)
Dr Gavan Griffith, Q.C. (from 17.7.86)
Mr Leslie Hollings, AM *Deputy Chairman*
Ms Bea Maddock
Mr James Mollison *Director*
Mr Robert W. Piper
Professor Margaret Plant
Mrs Penelope A.M. Seidler
Mr Lawrence Connell (from 5.6.87)
Mr Robert McArthur *Observer — Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment*

As at 30 June 1990
Hon E. Gough Whitlam AC QC *Chairman*
Mrs Betty Churcher AM *Director* (from 5.2.90)
Mr Lawrence Connell (to 3.6.90)
Mr Arthur Fitzgerald AM
Dr Gavan Griffith QC
Mr Michael Hershon
Mr Les Hollings AM
Dr Aila I. Keto
Ms Banduk Matika (from 28.9.89)
Mr James Mollison *Director* (to October 1989)
Mr Michael Moon
Mr René Rivkin
Mrs Penelope A.M. Seidler

As at 30 June 1994
Hon Lionel Bowen AC *Chairman*
Ms Bronwyn Bancroft
Miss Ita Buttrose AO OBE (to 10.10.93)
Mrs Betty Churcher AM *Director*
Mr Arthur Fitzgerald AM (to 17.5.94)
Mr Michael Hershon
Prof. Ian North
Mr John Olsen OBE (to 8.11.93)
Mr Brian Johns AO
Mr Colin Lanceley AO (from 26.4.94)
Ms Jane Singleton (from 26.5.94)
Mr Kerry Stokes AO
Dr Peter Wilenski AC

As at 30 June 1997
Mr Kerry Stokes AO Chairman
Mr Philip Bacon AM (from 4.12.96)
Ms Bronwyn Bancroft
Mrs Betty Churcher AM *Director*
Mr Brian Johns AO
Mr Colin Lanceley AO (to 25.4.97)
Mr Bernard Leser
Ms Ros Moriarty
Mr Cameron O'Reilly
Ms Jane Singleton (to 25.4.97)
Mr James Spigelman QC

As at 30 June 1999
Mr Kerry Stokes AO Chairman from 1 January 1996
Mr Cameron O'Reilly Deputy Chairman from 10 December 1996
Dr Brian Kennedy Director
Mr Richard Allert AM
Mr Philip Bacon AM
Mr Anthony Berg AM
Mr Brian Johns AO
Mrs Ann Lewis AM
Mr Harold Mitchell
Ms Carol Schwartz
Ms Lyn Williams

As at 30 June 2002
Mr Harold Mitchell Chairman from 01.1.01
Mr Robert Ferguson (resigned 21.12.01)
Dr Brian Kennedy Director
Mr Richard Allert AM
Mr Philip Bacon AM
Mr Anthony Berg AM
Mr Michael Chaney
Dr Peter Farrell
Mrs Ann Lewis AM
Ms Carol Schwartz
Mrs Lyn Williams AM
Mr Robert Champion de Crespigny AC
Mrs Roslyn Packer

National Museum of Australia
as listed in annual reports

As at 30 June 1982
Mr A.T. Dix Chairman
Mr P.H. Pigott AM Deputy Chairman
The Hon Sir Peter Crisp
Mrs R. Danziger (from 5.5.82)
Dr D.F. McMichael CBE (then Secretary, Commonwealth Department of
Home Affairs and Environment)
Prof. D.J. Mulvaney (to 9.12.82)
Dr W.D.L. Ride
Mrs CM. Serventy OAM (from 5.5.82)
Mr R.H. Smith (to 16.2.81)
Lady Stephen (to 20.1.82)
Mr E.P. Willmot (from 22.2.82)
Mr W. Wulanybuma
Prof. J. Zubrzycki CBE
As at 30 June 1988

A. T. Dix AO  Chairman
J. W. A. Iremonger (to 26.8.88) Deputy Chairman
M. H. Cass
H. E. Cattalini
D. Y. Ober
P. H. Pigott AM
W. D. L. Ride AM
L. Ryan
C. M. Serventy OAM
J. H. Thompson AM
P. A. Turner
D. F. McMichael CBE  Director

As at 21 June 1990

Mr A. T. Dix AO  Chairman
Mr J. W. A. Iremonger Deputy Chairman
Dr M. H. Cass
Ms H. E. Cattalini
Mr D. Y. Ober
Mr P. H. Pigott AM
Dr W. D. L. Ride AM
Dr L. Ryan
Mrs C. M. Serventy OAM
Mr J. H. Thompson AM
Ms P. A. Turner AM
Mrs K. Dal Bon Acting Director

From 22 June 1990

Mr R. Edwards AO  Chairman
Mr J. W. A. Iremonger Deputy Chairman
Professor M. Archer
Ms H. Chung
Mr D. Y. Ober
Mr A. Richardson
Mr K. Roberts
Associate Professor T. Stannage
Mr J. H. Thompson AM
Ms P. A. Turner AM
Mrs K Dal Bon Director

As at 30 June 1992

Dr R. Edwards AO  Chairman
Mr J. Enfield AO Deputy Chairman
Professor M. Archer
Ms H. Chung
Mr V. McGrath (from 23.8.91)
Mr A. Richardson
Mr K. Roberts
Dr T. Stannage
Mr B. Palmer Acting Director (from 5.6.92)
Mr J. Thompson AM (until 17.6.92)
Ms P. Turner AM (until 17.6.92)
Mrs K. Dal Bon Director (until 4.6.92)
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As at 30 June 2002

The Hon Anthony Staley Chairman
Mr David Barnett OBE (17.12.98 to 16.12.01, reappointed 27.3.02 to 26.3.05)
Mr Marcus Besen AO Deputy Chairman
Miss Sharon Brown
Mr Christopher Pearson
Mr Andrew Reeves
Mr John Thame
Mr Ronald Webb
Ms Dawn Casey Director
Mr Ken Roberts AM (26.6.99 to 28.6.02)
Ms Catherine Santamaria (29.6.99 to 28.6.02)
Dr Michael Sexton (29.6.99 to 10.8.01)

As at 30 June 2003

The Hon Anthony Staley Chairman
Mr David Barnett OBE
Mr Marc Besen AO Deputy Chairman
Miss Sharon Brown
Mr Benjamin Chow
Mr Christopher Pearson
Ms Catherine Santamaria
Mr John Thame
Mr Ronald Webb
Ms Dawn Casey Director
Mr Andrew Reeves (to 24.11.02)
Appendix B

Directors of the National Museum of Australia

Dr Don McMichael  Director 1 February 1985 – 24 May 1989
Ms Kaye Dal Bon  Acting Director 5 June 1989 – 4 June 1990; Director 5 June 1990 – 4 June 1992
Mr Brian Palmer  Acting Director 5 June 1992 – 31 October 1992
Ms Margaret Coaldrake  Director 1 November 1992 – 31 October 1995
Dr William Jonas, appointed Director November 1995 but resigned position before taking it up due to ill health.
Ms Margaret Coaldrake  Acting Director 1 November 1995 – June 1996
Dr Darryl McIntyre and Ms Louise Douglas  Acting Directors for a few weeks each until September 1996
Dr William Jonas  Director September 1996 – April 1999
Ms Dawn Casey  Acting Director 12 March 1999 – 14 December 1999; Director 15 December 1999 – 12 December 2004
Mr Craddock Morton  Acting Director, December 2004 - 2005, Director 2005 to present

Directors of the National Gallery of Australia

Mr James Mollison  Acting Director 1971 – 1977; Director 1977 - 1989
Ms Betty Churcher  Director 1990 - 1997
Dr Brian Kennedy  Director 1997 - 2004
Mr Ron Radford  Director 2005 -
Appendix C

Selected Visitor Statistics for the National Gallery of Australia and the National Museum of Australia

National Gallery of Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>No. of visitors to NGA building</th>
<th>No. of visitors to NGA exhibitions in Australia</th>
<th>No. of visitors to NGA exhibitions internationally</th>
<th>Total no. of visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002/2003</td>
<td>367,547</td>
<td>1,291,880</td>
<td>4,281</td>
<td>1,659,427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/2002</td>
<td>505,122</td>
<td>390,387</td>
<td>35,188</td>
<td>930,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000/2001</td>
<td>589,569</td>
<td>300,143</td>
<td>3,871</td>
<td>893,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999/2000</td>
<td>574,415</td>
<td>205,219</td>
<td>504,233</td>
<td>1,283,867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/1999</td>
<td>366,773</td>
<td>391,171</td>
<td>146,105</td>
<td>904,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997/1998</td>
<td>482,370</td>
<td>172,342</td>
<td></td>
<td>654,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994/1995</td>
<td>514,519</td>
<td>292,466</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>986,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991/1992</td>
<td>474,123</td>
<td>393,653</td>
<td></td>
<td>867,776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989/1990</td>
<td>298,510</td>
<td>374,831</td>
<td></td>
<td>682,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986/1987</td>
<td>254,375</td>
<td>99,004</td>
<td></td>
<td>353,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983/1984</td>
<td>559,205</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>559,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982/1983</td>
<td>531,223</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>531,223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In 2002/2003 a Gallery survey (no. of people surveyed not recorded) reported:

- 96% of visitors believed their understanding and enjoyment of the visual arts was enhanced through their visit.
- 89% of visitors were satisfied with Gallery exhibitions and displays.
- 1,154,925 users accessed information about the collection via the Gallery’s websites [not clear if this included in-house kiosks?], research library and collection study room.
- 97,796 people attended Gallery events and activities.
- 79% of people who accessed the Gallery’s programs and activities were satisfied.
National Museum of Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No. of visitors 2001/2002</th>
<th>No. of visitors 2002/2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permanent exhibitions</td>
<td>643,543</td>
<td>486,080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary exhibitions</td>
<td>116,192</td>
<td>47,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travelling exhibitions</td>
<td>82,508</td>
<td>192,599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public programs</td>
<td>26,290</td>
<td>36,539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>34,869</td>
<td>62,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>903,402</td>
<td>825,049</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A 2002/2003 survey of 2,500 visitors conducted by the Museum found that:

- 95% of visitors recorded a satisfactory or very satisfied visit (90% was recorded in 2001/2002).
- Age groups most strongly represented were 36 – 40 and 41 – 45.
- 44% visited as a family group (42% in 2001/2002).
- 32% of visitors were from Canberra, 57% from other areas of Australia, in particular Sydney and regional New South Wales.
- The average length of a visit was just under two hours although 14% of visitors stayed for three hours or more.
Appendix D:

Brief selected survey of budgets of National Gallery of Australia and National Museum of Australia

National Gallery of Australia

Note: Over the ten years leading to the NGA's opening in 1982 there was $35.5 million spent on acquisitions. In 1982 the federal government committed another $27 million for acquisitions up to 1988 (the Bicentenary year).

*Note — a Capital Use Charge is imposed by Government of the net assets of the Gallery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Total Budget (not incl. capital use charge*)</th>
<th>Acquisitions Budget</th>
<th>Total no. of Acquisitions incl. purchases and gifts</th>
<th>Revenue earned from non-govt. sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002/2003</td>
<td>$42.216m ill.</td>
<td>$3.518m ill.</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>$10.351m ill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/2002</td>
<td>$42.564m ill.</td>
<td>$3.5m ill.</td>
<td>6,943</td>
<td>$12.745m ill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000/2001</td>
<td>$41.456m ill.</td>
<td>$6.485m ill.</td>
<td>1,012</td>
<td>$15.972m ill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999/2000</td>
<td>$42.199m ill.</td>
<td>$3.82m ill.</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>$17.455m ill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/1999</td>
<td>$32.5m ill.</td>
<td>n/a – though a total of $13.595m ill. of acquisitions came from 194 donations and 156 purchases</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>$12m ill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996/1997</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,806</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993/1994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,590</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989/1990</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,317</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986/1987</td>
<td>$17,449,641</td>
<td>$3,634,892</td>
<td>2,164</td>
<td>$2,024,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984/1985</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4,432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982/1983</td>
<td>$18,077,166</td>
<td>$4,371,462</td>
<td>4,912</td>
<td>$2,677,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981/1982</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,565</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980/1981</td>
<td>$11,065,000</td>
<td>$7,100,067</td>
<td>5,208</td>
<td>$59,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979/1980</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6,013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976/1977</td>
<td>$4,226,000</td>
<td>$3,335,985</td>
<td>6,806</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974/1975</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9,828</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972/1973</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,517</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968/1969</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966/1967</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
National Museum of Australia

*Note - 'collections' acquired can vary from containing one to several items, or sometimes dozens (as in collections of papers)

**Note - a Capital Use Charge is imposed by Government on the net assets of the Museum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Total Budget (not incl. capital use charge**)</th>
<th>Acquisitions Budget (in the NMA this was not a regular separate allowance)</th>
<th>Total Acquisitions incl. purchases and gifts</th>
<th>Revenue earned from non-govt. sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002/2003</td>
<td>$67,565,000</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>32 collections* (14 purchases)</td>
<td>$4,516,459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/2002</td>
<td>$61,737,000</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>93 collections* (41 purchases)</td>
<td>$3,204,933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995/1996</td>
<td>$8,532,185</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>45 collections*</td>
<td>$1,769,322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993/1994</td>
<td>$9,786,892</td>
<td>$51,227</td>
<td>80 collections*</td>
<td>$142,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991/1992</td>
<td>$5,439,000</td>
<td>$47,282</td>
<td>93 collections*</td>
<td>$23,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989/1990</td>
<td>$3,731,404</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>52 collections*</td>
<td>$11,404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987/1988</td>
<td>$2,431,396</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>102 collections*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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