

Curriculum Support

for teaching in

CREATIVE ARTS 7-12

www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au

2001 Vol. 6 No. 3

Feature article

The following article was written by Craig Judd and is a development from What is the Art World?, a keynote lecture presented at the AES conference in April. The keynote, which discussed the mutuality of interdependent organisations, individuals and professions in the contemporary art world has been refocused in this article, on the role and activities of the curator, specifically the current Artistic Director of the Biennale of Sydney, Richard Grayson.

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ACTIVITIES OF A CURATOR

The museum is a holding place, a large storage unit, if you like, that contains a range of objects deemed by experts to have cultural significance. The museum or art gallery curator is part of a team of professionals devoted to the care, research and display of material culture, be it artefacts or specimens. Today there are as many different types of curators as there are museums.

The word *curator* means simply a keeper or custodian. It can also mean a guardian, a manager, overseer or superintendent. Ultimately the word is one of many derived from the Latin *cura* for care, treatment or concern.

Until the 1960s to be a museum curator was regarded as a rather sedate occupation. It was something more akin to a librarian, only instead of books and various works on paper and other ephemera, the museum curator took care of a collection of paintings, sculptures or prints, etc. From the 1970s a new type of curator and curatorship has emerged. The occupation is now one that is more pro-active and responsive to the needs of the institution and its particular brief to the general public.

Depending on the type of institution, this brief might include the permanent display of the key elements of a collection plus the development of a program of temporary exhibits. Most of the larger public art galleries work with this model. For example, at Dubbo Regional Gallery there is a shifting display of its permanent collection which specialises in contemporary and historical art that references animals. At Bathurst Regional Gallery the permanent collection revolves around contemporary ceramics, while Tamworth Regional Gallery specialises in contemporary textile art. These institutions then receive visiting exhibitions such as the very popular *ArtExpress*. Curators also attempt to respond to the particular demands of local audiences by encouraging local artists and art societies to exhibit. Sometimes these institutions also generate touring exhibitions. This year, staff at the Dubbo Regional Gallery organised an impressive exhibition of the under-sung historical Australian artist George Lambert. Entitled

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People and Destiny: George Lambert and Federation. This exhibition is now touring throughout NSW and Victoria. This particular exhibition has taken just over two years to come to fruition. At larger institutions the lead-in time for a large exhibition can take up to five years.

Today's curator is still formally in charge of the preservation and well-keeping of a collection of similar types of material. However, unlike in the nineteenth century, there are a team of professionals to help the curator. There are conservators who work specifically with objects to preserve them over time. There are preparators who help move and hang or situate works. There are lighting technicians. There are security officers. There are cleaners. There are museum educators and public programs officers who help make the displays of work more accessible to the general public and to the broad education community. There are registrars and exhibition coordinators who are involved with freight and touring works from the permanent collection or else they help to manage visiting exhibitions. Also associated with the art gallery and museum are design, marketing and publication experts whose role is to promote the institution and its activities.

But back to the activities of the curator.

The curator also has a brief to acquire works to augment the existing collection. With permanent collections this brief is becoming more and more difficult. Firstly, in Australian museums there is always a scramble for either government funds or private sponsorship. Unfortunately, for museums and other cultural agencies, Australia does not have a tradition of philanthropy in the Arts. Also within any museum because of this scarcity of funds, each institution defines certain priorities as to the extent of purchases. Larger museums have up to ten departments each vying for funds which again makes this particular brief of the curator all the more difficult.

Secondly, with historically based collections there is the fact that there are only a set number of works that have survived over time. In 2001 there are very few historically significant artworks whose location and owners are unknown. Sometimes works that have survived in private collections come up for sale. Recently a little known Eugene von Guerard painting was discovered in an old house in England and put up for auction in Australia. Sometimes by chance, intrepid researchers find large collections of works previously thought lost. For example, Rosalind Hollinrake found a huge collection of the 1920s tonalist painter Clarice Beckett covered in possum excrement in a shed outside Melbourne. This is a rare occurrence in the world of museums and art history. However, this particular "find" has become the basis of a very popular touring exhibition and a concurrent very important art historical, critical and general public re-evaluation of Beckett's work.

Curators are expected to get to know and understand "their" collections. A major part of the contemporary curators' occupation is to research the works and lives

of individual artists in their collection in order to re-configure narratives and critical reactions. In this process the curator can be seen to literally dissect and recompose the body of the collection like the famed Dr. Frankenstein. For example, Barry Pearce, Head Curator of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is in charge of one of Australia's richest collections of historically significant artwork. Over the last ten years he has single handedly and in collaboration re-presented this collection. While acknowledging that personal taste is often a difficult quality to avoid or suppress, Pearce has managed, in the various re-hangs and solo exhibitions derived from the Australian collection, to reveal a range of new readings of much loved and sometimes unfamiliar works. Most recently, in the *Australian Icons* Pearce chose paintings and prints that displayed his view of the precious "eye-teeth" of the Australian collection. In a similar vein Deborah Edwards, Curator of Australian Art of the Art Gallery of New South Wales is preparing an exhibition to re-configure Margaret Preston's art for the twenty-first century.

At Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art there is the permanent collection of the Power Bequest that is sometimes sourced for exhibitions. Unfortunately and strangely, this fantastic resource of quite "nutty" art from the 1960s and '70s seems under used and little understood by the resident curators. Contemporary art is after all, an entity with its own important history and contexts. There was, however, a tantalising glimpse of the extent of this collection in the recent exhibition, *MCA Unpacked*. This exhibition presented a different interpretation of curatorship by throwing open the MCA's collection to non-museum professionals. Well known celebrities like film maker Jane Campion, choreographer Graeme Murphy, scientist Adrienne Clarke, fashion guru Akira Isogawa and former ATSIIC commissioner Evelyn Scott chose their favourite works for display. The purpose of *MCA Unpacked* was not only to reveal unexpected combinations of work from the permanent collection but also to underline the fact that contemporary art need not be an obscure and mysteriously alien form. At the MCA there is an emphasis on presenting what is considered the most contemporary and challenging aspects of contemporary art.

The commercial art gallery owner or dealer can also be considered something of a curator. They research to find suitable artists for their "stable". In consultation with the artist they help to organise and arrange displays of work for sale. They aim to promote public and critical interest in this process of presentation.

Freelance curators are not as tied to the necessity to reveal the contents or (continuing the Dr Frankenstein allusion) innards of a particular collection. Rather, freelance curators are invited to work to a particular theme that has already been decided or else, are asked to develop an exhibition concept. This is done solely by them or in consultation.

A good example of this process is the way the decision was made to select the Artistic Director for the Biennale of Sydney 2002. After the public and critical success of the Biennale of Sydney 2000, a series of focus groups were called from the artistic and broader community to discuss the perceived successes and failures, as well as the future potential for this international festival of contemporary art. One of the consistent cries that emerged from these focus groups was the need for the Biennale of Sydney organisation to be transparent as to the choice of the next Artistic Director or *curatorium*. A *curatorium* is a word that refers to a committee of curators. It was thought, that although the 2000 exhibition was very successful in drawing huge crowds with the exciting and diverse nature of the artworks on display, the manner of choosing the *curatorium* was puzzling. The Biennale of Sydney 2000 had six eminent Australian and international curators who chose the work. They were Fumio Nanjo, Harold Szeeman, Robert Storr, Hettie Perkins, Louise Neri and Sir Nicholas Serota working under the chairmanship of Nick Waterlow.

To address the focus groups concerns a procedure was established where a large number of people from the Australian art world were invited to submit proposals for the constitution, nature or themes of the next Biennale of Sydney to be staged in 2002. From these proposals a select committee chose a short list of six nominees. These six people then presented a more fulsome dissertation on their concepts for the forthcoming Biennale of Sydney 2002 to a committee composed of representatives from the Board of the Biennale of Sydney, the major exhibiting institutions, the NSW Ministry of the Arts, as well as local artists. Out of this process, Richard Grayson, artist and former director of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide was chosen. His concept tile brief is *(The World May Be) Fantastic*.

Grayson has said that he wants *(The World May Be) Fantastic* to be an exhibition which encompasses

practices that use fictions, narratives, invented methodologies, hypotheses, subjective belief systems, modellings, fakes and experiments as a means to generate work. The exhibition concentrates on projects and approaches that are fantastic, partial, various suggestive, ambitious, subjective, wobbly and eccentric to normal orbits.

These practices reflect in turn on our everyday understandings and dominant belief systems, suggesting that they too are not inevitable, but are mutable contingent, developing, hallucinatory, slippery, and various.

Now the difficult part begins.

The next task is to compose the exhibition to suit this concept title. To many people this concept title is clever, evocative and suggestive in a New Age, future fiction, SBS sort of way. After all it is the new century! It is interesting to note that there seems a general move away

from the rather bleak and sometimes apocalyptic musings that were evident in art from the 1980s. Gone or now perhaps suppressed are the deeply held suspicions that surround such issues like globalisation, gender, race and power relations, commodification and their “dire” effects on the development of culture. For example, Dale Hickey the curator of the 4th SITE biennial held this year in Santa Fe, New Mexico, has called the exhibition *Beau Monde: Towards a New Cosmopolitanism*. Hickey states:

I am not interested in the world reformed and redecorated. I am interested in the world intensified and elaborated.

(The Art Newspaper, July–August 2001, p. 22)

Perhaps the easiest choice that Richard Grayson, the Artistic Director has to make, is the inclusion of work made by Australian and New Zealand artists. From its inception in 1973, for the Biennale of Sydney an important brief of the exhibition has been to display the work of Australian artists alongside recent international practice. This juxtaposition is to create a range of dialogues, not only amongst artists, critics and the general public, but also amongst the artworks themselves, so as to generate new and perhaps unexpected readings. For over 30 years the Biennale of Sydney has been dedicated to the creation of this dialogue. This brief is made all the more important when one realises that there are no commercial galleries in Australia dedicated to the consistent exhibition of recent international art.

At present Richard Grayson is touring the world, trawling various locations, for appropriate international artists to invite. He is negotiating with individual artists, their dealers and museums and their curators for work. What is often forgotten is that there are now over 50 Biennales operating around the world. This creates a scenario where there is only a limited amount of big name artworks available for display. So the curators of international contemporary art exhibitions like the Biennale of Sydney have emerged to become a new museological creature. They have been called by Patricia Bickers, editor of the English publication *Art Monthly*, “über-curators”, constantly touring the world, part publicist or spruiker, part apologist and part beggar. Bickers goes on to state that this type of curator is actually quite removed from the on-the-ground, on the street production of contemporary art, which is precisely why Richard Grayson was appointed. It is felt that his experience as an artist would put him in good stead to compose an exhibition that marked a generational and intellectual shift from the previous Biennale of Sydney. In a recent interview for the prestigious industry journal, *The Art Newspaper* Grayson says:

I am resigned to an initial double-take on this (Biennale of Sydney) as it is far less comprised of blue-chip contemporary iconic work. It will be a much more experimental and propositional event. At the same time I'm hoping that people will get

excited about it. It's going to be pretty chewy and feisty and intriguing. And somewhere deep down it's pretty optimistic and expansive so far as the possibilities of art are concerned.

Sebastian Smee, "Australia's rival art festivals"
The Art Newspaper July–August 2001, p. 53

Once final decisions are made as to the make up and "look" of the show, the Biennale of Sydney office then can officially invite artists to participate in the exhibition and associated public programs. The office also deals with freight, insurance, copyright issues, publicity, education and public programs. The Biennale of Sydney office also works very closely with the staff of the key exhibiting venues to ensure the smooth delivery of the exhibition. Another part of the office develops sponsorship and marketing packages to further promote the show. For the duration of the exhibition the office arranges travel details and accommodation of visiting artists, curators and critics. It also liaises with consular officials to arrange functions and other attendant publicity. (Many of the participating artists are sponsored by national cultural agencies such as the British Council or the United States Information Service). The Biennale of Sydney Office also coordinates the writing and publication of the catalogue of the exhibition, plus the Visitor's guides and the Education kits.

(The World May Be) Fantastic, the Biennale of Sydney 2002, will be staged from May 15–July 14, 2002 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Object Galleries, City Exhibition Spaces, Customs House and Artspace. There will also be site-specific outdoor works.

In the months, weeks and days before the final hang of the exhibition is decided there is a degree of negotiation between these institutions as to what works go where. There are anxious moments awaiting freight from disparate parts of the world. There are some spaces that do damage to the content or "look" of specific artworks. Some artworks do not complement each other by their proximity. Some works are just too big or too small for particular locations. As in the arrangement of one's lounge room the curator makes decisions about the final décor or finish of a space. This activity is considered by some commentators to be the most glamorous part of a curator's occupation, but it is in fact, the smallest part of the job. This part of the curator's work is ultimately made again in negotiation with exhibition managers, registrars and conservators. Sometimes the artist is consulted in this process.

But I am sure after this mammoth effort of commitment, energy, thought, coordination and organisation from the teams of people involved with the Biennale of Sydney 2002 that indeed *(The World May Be) Fantastic!*

Craig Judd
Education and Public Programs Manager
Biennale of Sydney 2002

Artist's statement

Revisionary, Guan Wei

Artists submitting works for major national and international exhibitions prepare statements such as this one by the artist, Guan Wei. The work, Revisionary, is an installation first shown at the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra in 1998, it was then a solo exhibition at the MCA in 1999 and in 2000 it was in the Kwangju Biennale in Korea. The statement is transcribed as the artist has written it.

Background

Guan Wei was born in 1957 in Beijing, China. In 1989, having graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at Beijing Capital University in 1986, Guan Wei came to Australia to take up an artist-in-residency at the Tasmanian School of Art. He was invited to undertake two further residencies; one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (1992 to 1993), the other at the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University (1993 to 1994). Guan Wei's work has a profoundly felt, if implicitly ironic moral dimension. In their complex symbolic form, his subjects potently embody our era's social and environmental dilemmas. They are equally the product of his rich, cultural repertory of symbols—and his informed socio-political awareness—born of his experience of the contrasting realities of his former home, China, and (since 1989) his new home, Australia. Guan Wei has held twenty-five solo exhibitions, won several significant art awards and has been included in numerous important contemporary exhibitions in Australia and internationally.

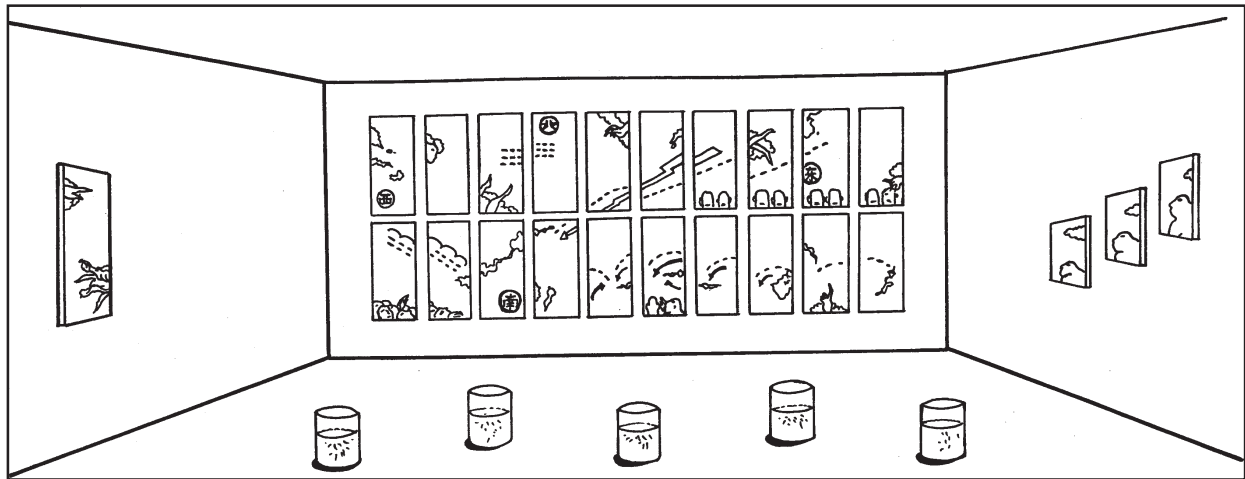
He is represented by Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

Selected solo exhibitions

- 2000 Looking for home, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore
- 1999 Nesting, or the Art of Idleness, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
- 1998 Revisionary, Drill Hall Gallery, The Australian National University
- 1997 The Last Supper, Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo
- 1996 Magic Garden, Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

Selected group exhibitions

- 2000 Kwangju Biennale 2000, Kwangju, South Korea
- 1999 Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
- 1998 Five Continents in a City, 2nd International Salon of Painting, Museum of Mexico City
- 1995 Australian Perspecta, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1993 Silent Energy, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford
- Mao Goes Pop, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
- New Art from China, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong and Hanart TZ Gallery, Taipei.



Revisionary, Guan Wei, 98 (design draft)

Revisionary

Statement about the works:

1. Contemporary culture, science and varied forms of knowledge have created an entirely different universe from that which used to be *known* by mankind. Changes within the world make our understanding of the Universe much more complicated today than in the past. From the emergence of the metagalaxy to the existence of the atom and microbe, it is necessary to explore the question, which is the real world? Approaching the year 2000, let us review the history of mankind. However, it is perhaps even more important to look into the future, where new miracles of humans' creation will abound.
2. My works will adopt a series of symbols, elements of our culture, such as scientific codes, computer words, biological molecules and DNA, etc. To reconstitute and transform them will serve to unveil the *meaning* of being. Traditional visual languages, such as Western art history, the inclusion of gods, angels and demons have been adapted in my work as a kind of magnetic field or energy, that exerts influence upon each other, which results in both mutual attraction and repulsion. The dots could well be interpreted as codes and messages transmitted from ancient times or deep space: DNA, RNA etc.
3. My works are engaged in exploration of the possibilities of presenting, from varied angles, a new panorama among fields of the humanities: history, geography, ecology, mythology, science and the cultures of the East and West. The languages within these paintings are designed to resurrect our memory of the past while inspiring imagination about the future. Memory and imagination are further strengthened, presented and extended through the gaps between the canvases.

Construction of works:

1. There are four paintings, one of them consists of twenty canvas panels. Each

panel is 120 x 50 cm and one painting is only on the one canvas panel sized 120 x 50 cm; the other two paintings have five smaller canvas panels, each panel is 45 x 60 cm.

2. Five specimen jars, 35 cm high, 28 cm in diameter (each). Water, fish weed and 50 tadpoles are inside each jar.

Installation of the works:

1. The works should be installed in one room. The twenty canvas panels will hang on one side of the wall, and in two rows of ten, horizontally; panels 1–10 on the top row and 11–20 along the bottom row. There should be an 8 cm gap between panels and a 10 cm space between the top and bottom rows. Also those six panels should be hung on the other three sides of the walls (see the design draft).
2. The specimen jars are installed on the floor below the paintings to cross each other in two lines, each line separated by a 50 cm gap. There should be a one metre gap between each jar in the same line. The installation of the jars is variable, depending on the exhibition space.

Guan Wei
1998

