

Using the South Australian School of Art Gallery (SASA Gallery) as a case study, in this paper I intend to argue the relevance and consider the potential of art school galleries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian university context.<sup>1</sup>

There is a growing body of literature engaging with the shifting role galleries play in the education of emerging artists, curators and the public. Rather than presenting exhibitions in front of which people are unchallenged and passively engaged, an emerging trend is the shift from educational programming being attached as an addendum to exhibitions; to educational methods, programs and processes being integrated into the gallery structures and curatorial frameworks. As Paul O'Neill (Research Fellow, Commissioning Contemporary Art with Situations, University of West England) and Mick Wilson (Dean, Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin) the editors of *Curating and the Educational Turn* insist, 'curating increasingly operates as an expanded educational praxis.' (2010, p.12)

To investigate the evolving relationships between education, contemporary art and curatorial practice, O'Neill and Wilson invited prominent curators and critics to respond to the proposition that contemporary curatorial and art practices had: 'produced, undergone, or otherwise manifested an educational turn.' (2010, p.12) The responses reveal many different positions – and while there is a lack of consensus – it is clear that there is a lot of interest in exhibition models in which art, curating and education converge, both within and independently of institutions.

For instance, in her contribution to the debate, Sally Tallant (Head of Programming, Serpentine Gallery, London) reflects on the influence of 'New Institutionalism' in 'Experiments in Integrated Programming'. She notes that much recent discussion had focused on 'transforming the art institution from within' (2010, p.187) resulting in the adoption of strategies such as dissolving the traditional hierarchies and boundaries between curatorial, education and public programming departments; creating flexible platforms for a range of short-term events; and an increased emphasis on projects that are discursive, open-ended, and are process rather than outcome driven. Even the need for a dedicated gallery space is challenged, as Alex Farquharson (Director, Nottingham Contemporary) insists:

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<sup>1</sup> The SASA Gallery is a part of Art, Architecture & Design incorporating the South Australian School of Art and the Louis Laybourne School of Architecture at the University of South Australia (SASA Gallery, AAD, UniSA). See: [www.unisa.edu.au/Business-community/Arts-and-culture/SASA-Gallery](http://www.unisa.edu.au/Business-community/Arts-and-culture/SASA-Gallery).

'New Institutionalism' and much recent art, side steps the problem of the white cube altogether. If white-walled rooms are the site for exhibitions one week, a recording studio or political workshop the next, then it is no longer the container that defines the contents as art, but the contents that determine the identity of the container. (Cited in Tallant, 2010)

Several of the curators and critics included in *Curating and the Educational Turn* consider projects where educational strategies such as discussions, talks, symposia and debates had been shifted from being peripheral programs supporting exhibitions, to being of primary importance, and frequently the main 'object of curatorial production.' (O'Neill & Wilson, 2010, p.13).

One project that is frequently cited and celebrated by writers in *Curating and the Educational Turn* is Anton Vidokle's *unitednationsplaza*, which was first held in Berlin in 2006/7, with later iterations staged in Mexico and New York in 2008/9. Originally the 'exhibition as school' model was developed by a curatorial team for *Manifesta 6*, a Biennale which was to be held in Cyprus, in 2006. Rather than hold another survey of International art, they had planned to use the budget to stage a radical and open art school. By making the project temporary and accessible to the public the curators hoped to avoid the constraints of real art schools – such as regulations and limited access. Vidokle notes that the curatorium were keen to generate those qualities embodied in art schools, including the commitment to experimentation, the focus on process and the generation of activities and publications, that they believed were important. In an inspiring passage he wrote that art schools are:

...one of the few places left where experimentation is, to some degree, encouraged, where emphasis is supposedly on process and learning rather than on product. Art schools are also multidisciplinary institutions by nature, where discourse, practice and presentation can co-exist without necessarily privileging one over the other. The actual activities that typically take place in an art school – experimentation, scholarship, research, discussion, criticism, collaboration, friendship – contribute as a continuous process of seeking out and redefining the potential in practice and theory. An art school is not concerned solely with the process of learning but it can be, and often is, a super active site of cultural production: books and magazines, exhibitions new works, seminars and symposia, film screenings, concerts, performances, theatre

productions, new fashion and product designs, architectural projects, resources such as libraries and archives of all kinds, outreach and organization – these and many other activities and projects can be triggered here. (Vidokle, 2010, 152)

After conducting their investigation, while acknowledging the very disparate approaches and responses to their proposition, O'Neill and Wilson concluded that gallery models and curatorial practice:

...having moved, since the late 1960s, from an activity primarily involved with organising exhibitions of discrete artworks to, a practice with a considerably extended remit, contemporary curating may be distinguished from its precedents by an emphasis upon the framing and meditation of art and the circulation of ideas around art, rather than on its production and display. (O'Neill & Wilson, 2010, p.19).

When I started this paper I was intending to focus on how these ideas could be integrated into art school gallery programs. However, at this particular moment – when universities are under increasing economic pressure and all faculties are required to generate substantial research outcomes and achieve high Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative (ERA) rankings in order to be viable – there are equally important, or perhaps even more urgent, imperatives impacting on the role and structure of art school galleries in Australia than the convergence of educational and curatorial practices. How do we ensure that the potential for art school galleries to make a substantial contribution to research are realised?

### **SASA Gallery: A Case Study**

The SASA Gallery is a relatively new gallery, and when it was repositioned in 2006, the measurement of research outcomes through the Research Quality Framework (RQF) was already a significant issue for the art school in line with the ambitious and aspirational research priorities of the University of South Australia.

The SASA Gallery was strategically repositioned as a research facility to support the development of new and experimental contemporary art, design, writing and curatorial practices, and be an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery integrated arts industry and educational models to develop programs, resources and curricula that were both relevant to developments in the contemporary arts sector and that were aligned to the university's research and teaching/learning policies. The university's research policies, then

and now, clearly identify the need to increase research outcomes which can be measured by both internal and external criteria; to support early career researchers, increase post-graduate numbers and ensure timely completions, generate research funding, provide opportunities for students to engage in research-led, experiential and practice based learning, and have relevance and impact in the sector.

In order to both enable experimental, challenging and interdisciplinary models of curatorial practices, and address the need to deliver significant research outcomes, the SASA Gallery's structure is modelled on the idea of a research matrix. Through the SASA Gallery's integrated Exhibition, Publication and External Scholars Programs, research teams of curators, writers, artists and designers work with the SASA Gallery staff on projects for between six months and two years to develop new curated exhibitions; new artwork; new academic and creative texts; gain research funding; publish new creative and academic texts in an exhibition catalogue; and stage events which contribute to the development of a research culture, such as critiques, floortalks, performances and symposia.

Pivotal to the development of the SASA Gallery structure were early negotiations between Professor Kay Lawrence, who was then Head of School and is now the Chair of the SASA Gallery, the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Division of Art, Education and Social Sciences (DIVEASS, UniSA) and myself, which resulted in the provision of annual strategic funding of \$50,000 per annum tied to the delivery of research outcomes through the SASA Gallery's Exhibition and Publication Programs. As well as funding catalogues, artist fees and research/education staff, this allocation which has been provided by the Division every year for six years, is leveraged to secure further grant funding, facilitate industry and university partnerships, and generate in-kind support and sponsorships. All of the research outcomes of the SASA Gallery are collated and reported annually.

Key to the success of the SASA Gallery Exhibition, Publication and External Scholars Programs is the commitment to excellence and innovation upheld by the SASA Gallery Programming Committee. The committee is convened annually to peer assess exhibition proposals against published criteria; discuss policy, strategic direction and initiatives, and forge links between national arts organisations. Critical to the integrity of this committee is the inclusion of external scholars and the involvement of UniSA academics with research and research/education responsibilities, such as the Dean of Research, Associate Professor Margaret Peters; the Head of School, Professor Mads Gaardboe; AAD Portfolio Leaders for

Research and for Research/Education; as well as representation from studio based academics and the research post-graduate cohort. In 2012 the external scholars are Professor Nikos Papastergiadis, Cultural Studies, Media and Communication, Melbourne University; Brian Parkes, CEO, Jam Factory; architect Jan van Schaik, and Adjunct Professor Ian North.

Proposals to develop new exhibitions focusing on experimental, innovative contemporary art and design are invited from artists, designers, architects, writers and curators from across Australia. In particular post-graduate students and academics from AAD, UniSA and other universities are warmly encouraged to apply.

Since March 2007 there have been forty new exhibitions in the SASA Gallery Exhibition Program with curatorial structures that range from curators defining a premise aligned to their on-going research and selecting artworks for the exhibition, to artists collaborating on a speculative research projects that unfold in the space. Exhibition catalogues, each with between one to three academic essays or creative texts, are published alongside each exhibition through the SASA Gallery Publication Program. All of the catalogues are published in hard copy and on-line, are held in a number of libraries and have been indexed by BibliographiesArt Modern.

The SASA Gallery External Scholars Program has enabled over forty scholars to provide critical feedback to curators and artists during the development of an exhibition, write a text for an exhibition catalogue, and travel to Adelaide to participate in events and extend dialogue and debate. Scholars with very different areas of expertise and approaches have participated including: Brenda Croft, Domenico de Clario, Edward Colless, Colin Rhodes, Anne Brennan, Pat HOFFIE, Adrian Martin, Ross Gibson, Lola Greeno, Philip Jones, Ian McLean, Mary Zournazi, Maria Kunda, David Cross, Lisa Gorton and Daniel Thomas. The SASA Gallery also integrates artist in residency opportunities into the exhibition program, which facilitates new work to be created in-situ and enables staff and students to meet and work alongside their peers.

The research matrix structure and integration of the SASA Gallery Exhibition, Publication and External Scholars Programs has enabled a wide range of curatorial models and interdisciplinary projects to be supported, including experimental, speculative and discursive practices. Following are four examples of SASA Gallery exhibitions that delivered research

outcomes, involved current or recently graduated post-graduate students, and contributed to the research culture of the school:

### ***Three Ways to Hold, SASA Gallery, August 2010***

*Three Ways to Hold* was a collaborative interdisciplinary project between Brigid Currie, recent AAD, UniSA PhD graduate and her sister Alison Currie, a highly regarded dancer. Their joint proposal was speculative and indicated that they wanted to investigate aspects of the disciplines of dance and sculpture that intersected by engaging with space, weight and the force of gravity. The External Scholar, Sol Ulbrich, a Sydney based choreographer, worked intensively with the artists in the gallery for two weeks. Four performances lasting between one and seven hours, were staged and at the end of each performance the props, consisting of geometrical blocks made from white Styrofoam and canvas tarpaulins, variously folded, rolled and unfurled, were left in-situ. Each performance was documented and screened as a part of the exhibition. Significant outcomes included new creative work which attracted large audiences of from the visual art and dance sectors to all events and performances; the project received positive critical reviews and media coverage; a new text by Sol Ulbrich was published in the exhibition catalogue; both artists were awarded Arts SA grants to fund the research and development phase of the project and subsequently, Brigid Currie received a 2011 Samstag Award.

### ***Vague Possibilities, SASA Gallery, March 2011***

*Vague Possibilities* curated by Mary Knights investigated utopic and dystopic ideas around Nicholas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics. Matt Huppatz, Ray Harris, Monte Masi Lawton, James Marshall, all AAD, UniSA postgraduate students, along with Amy Spiers, a postgraduate student studying at the Victorian College of Art (VCA), Melbourne University, worked in the gallery using it as a studio space. Much of the work was process orientated or involved active engagement with the audience. Spier's work involved giving 1000 pieces of brightly coloured bubble-gum to gallery visitors along with a set of instructions: chew the gum; stick it to the gallery wall, but, it must touch a piece of gum that has already been stuck on the wall by a stranger. Exemplifying Claire Bishop's critique of Relational Aesthetics, at this point all utopian thoughts of 'conviviality' turned to a visceral sense of unease and discomfort. Timed to coincide with the beginning of the academic year and during the Fringe Festival, the exhibition was very well attended. The post-graduate cohort was actively engaged in developing new creative work, critiques and floortalks. External Scholar Edward Colless, Coordinator and Senior Lecturer, VCA, Melbourne University, wrote a new text for

the exhibition catalogue, participated in events and discussed the theoretical arguments around Relational Aesthetics. As well as contributing to the research culture in Adelaide, extending the network of emerging artists and curators, relationships between VCA and AAD post-graduate students were forged.

***Az Zaban Modari: Raqs-e Aab Raqs-e Setareh (from the Mother Tongue), SASA Gallery, August 2010***

Based on Siamak Fallah's current PhD research in which he investigates the potential of art to contribute to peace, the artist, a religious refugee from Iran, and his father Manochehr Fallah, an Iranian poet, undertook a four-week residency in the gallery. Each day Siamak worked for six hours meticulously transcribing a Bahai text onto the walls of the gallery with a pencil while his elderly father sat at desk writing his memoirs focusing on a part of Bahai history that is repressed in Iran. Objects that obliquely referenced the artist's journey to Australia from Iran were installed in the space. On one wall a looped video depicted of the artist's elderly parents cooking, praying, and placing photographs of people they once knew on their kitchen table. In the interaction between the artist, poet and audience it was revealed that the photographs depicted people that were persecuted for their religious beliefs. In the development stage Siamak received an Arts SA grant for travel and research. Prof Nikos Papastergiadis wrote a new text that was published along with a poem by Manochehr Fallah in Farsi and translated into English. The exhibition received significant critical reviews and media attention.

***Shards, SASA Gallery, October 2008***

*Shards* investigated the impact of colonisation on the families of three Indigenous artists Nici Cumpston (Barkindji), Yhonnie Scarce (Kokatha/Nukuna) and Judy Watson (Waanyi). As well as large photographs by Nici Cumpston and a series of prints by Judy Watson, two of the artists – Scarce and Watson – undertook residencies at the SASA Gallery to build ephemeral installations in-situ and participate in a range of events involving staff and students from AAD, David Uniapon College of Indigenous Education (DUCIER) and the local Aboriginal community. One of the most powerful events was an interactive work by Watson. Working with three or four people at a time Watson took casts of the participants ears with dental plaster. While their ears were blocked they read a harrowing account of interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the mid to late 1880s around Riversleigh, Queensland. The historical account included a disturbing reference to a shepherd's hut which had forty pairs of ears nailed to the walls 'collected during raiding

parties after the loss of so many cattle speared by the blacks' (Roberts, 2008, p.232). Watson made moulds from the casts, filled them with paraffin and beeswax and then nailed the cast wax ears to the walls of the gallery.<sup>2</sup> As well as new creative work based on research into oral and conventional histories, research outcomes included two new texts, one by Brenda Croft, Senior Curator, Australian National Gallery, published in the exhibition catalogue. Funding towards Judy Watson's residency and the development of new work in Adelaide was secured from Arts SA and the Helpmann Academy. Links were forged between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and curators, which led to further collaborations and the project gained critical reviews and media attention.

To conclude, in this paper I have argued that art school galleries have an important role to play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They contribute to the vibrancy of art schools, the education and development of emerging and established curators, artists and designers, and generate the environment and activities that Vidokle aspired to emulate in *unitednationsplaza*. Critically, at a time when the survival of art schools in universities is increasingly dependent on their capacity to deliver research outcomes, art school galleries have the potential to contribute by enhancing research culture, support post-graduate research, and generate significant research outcomes across funding, new creative works, curatorial practice and publications.

### **Postscript**

While some of the most exciting new research in curating, art and design is being generated in art school galleries there are challenges. A significant amount of research undertaken in art school galleries is not currently eligible to be counted against internal or external ERA guidelines. A number of interesting possibilities to overcome this problem were mooted at the ACUADS conference including reviving a national peer-review panel to referee texts published by art schools in exhibition catalogues; extending the publishing capacity of art school galleries; creating exhibition circuits and exchanges between art school galleries; and devising project models that could attract ARC funding.

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<sup>2</sup> Margit Bruenner, postgraduate student, AAD, UniSA, wrote: 'I listen and can't help being deeply involved. I am completely aware of the 'not hearing' what has to be heard...Knowing history does not mean that it can be comprehended...With this little treatment I was given a present. My heart was made susceptible and for a short moment I felt able to access, share and listen [to] Aboriginal history.' Margit Bruenner, unpublished note, September 2008.

## **Bibliography**

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