

**SNELL Ted**

## **After The Ball: The Cinderella Art Collections<sup>1</sup> and their future**

### **Abstract**

What is the benefit of having an art gallery on campus as part of the infrastructure of a university? The proliferation of art galleries within universities world-wide might seem to prove the need without taking further issue, however, in an increasingly difficult economic climate that question is now being asked more regularly and with more determination by senior administrators charged with the responsibility of balancing diminishing budgets. When teaching departments are at risk and basic services are under review the existence of a gallery requiring substantial resources can be seen as an anomaly offering a quick solution to a pressing budget problem.

I will show in this paper that university art galleries provide an invaluable resource for the core business of teaching and learning and research and development and make a singular contribution to the community profile of their institution. Using examples from within Australia, the United States and England I will explore the potential for university art galleries to become centres for research & development in partnership with a wide spectrum of disciplines and to combine this activity with a focus on teaching & learning.

### **Biography**

Ted Snell is Professor of Contemporary Art and Dean of Art, John Curtin Centre, Curtin University of Technology, Perth Western Australia. He is a former Head of the School of Art and the previous chair of ACUADS. Over the past quarter century he has taught in the Visual Culture and studio programme at Curtin and contributed to advocacy and policy development in the visual arts nationally through his involvement with numerous organizations. Currently a Board member of the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) and Chair of Artbank he has recently chaired the Premier's Fashion Industry Taskforce in Western Australia.

He is also the Western Australia visual arts writer for *The Australian* and contributes regularly to journals such as *Art & Australia*, *Object* and *Artlink*.

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### Heart And Soul

Since their establishment one hundred and fifty years ago universities in Australia have commissioned and collected artworks to enrich the cultural milieu of their institutions and by osmosis ensure that their graduates were fully rounded individuals with a balanced education that included the arts and culture. The belief that the arts are inherently good and led to the creation of better people and a better society, as Herbert Read suggested, was justification enough for establishing collections and later galleries to house and display the works acquired and donated, such as the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre for the Visual Arts at Stanford.

‘Like the library and the laboratory, the museum should be a vital resource for inquiry, scholarship and enjoyment. Studying works of art can enrich the understanding of different epochs, cultures and human experiences and can ennoble the minds and spirits of members of our community.’<sup>3</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed by the committee established to set up the Whitworth Gallery, now part of Manchester University who saw the gallery and its collection as:

‘...a permanent influence on the highest character in the directions of Commercial and Technical Instruction and the cultivation of taste and knowledge of the Fine Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.’<sup>4</sup>

It became a sign of maturity for a university to establish a gallery (theatre, concert hall) and that imperative has continued to drive institutions in a competition to see who can have the largest and most impressive cultural facilities. The completion of the John Curtin Gallery in 1998 was seen as a visionary and ambitious project that identified Curtin as a different kind of University, one that was enterprising and valued culture; a ‘Heart and Soul’ university with first-class facilities for showcasing a wide range of academic resources,

conducting prestigious events and building strong community links. Like many universities before, Curtin decided that if it was going to offer its students a complete education, then it was essential to provide access to the arts as an integral part of campus life.

Certainly over the past five years the expansion of infrastructure in the arts (new galleries as part of the refurbishment and construction of purpose-built facilities for art schools and the opening of new or renovated gallery spaces)<sup>5</sup> supports the belief that universities have a commitment to the visual arts as key contributors to their core business, however, the difficulty is that many of the avenues of participation in those central activities are closed or guarded.

This notion of 'ennobling the mind and spirit', though still espoused, is not as easily quantified in budget documents or annual reports and while few are prepared to challenge the basic assumption of the benefit of the arts, increasingly the argument is reduced to priorities and pragmatism in the face of budget deficits.

### Teaching And Learning

While we might expect a positive response from an audience of artists, art educators and those academics passionate about the arts and sensitive to the power of the visual arts to carry messages that inform and challenge, it is increasingly difficult to mount an argument based solely on osmosis; contact with art, while enjoyable and potentially enriching, is not enough. Linking the exhibition programme or the display of the collection to specific courses and designing an integrated series of events around exhibitions that explore key issues are some way of ensuring a closer connection between the gallery and the teaching schools of the university.

Although myriad examples abound in Australia and elsewhere, the following projects illustrate some of the ways in which the core business of teaching within the university can be integrated into the gallery's programme.

At the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, and at the University of California Berkley, they have established a Faculty Advisory Committee that meets two to four times a year to introduce the rationale for their forthcoming programme and to encourage feedback from the faculty on the kinds of exhibitions and modes of presentation that would facilitate their teaching. This direct involvement with the teaching staff has led to proposals for exhibitions and a greater commitment from staff in taking up the challenge of integrating the gallery's programme into their teaching.

At Curtin University Dr Ann Schilo from the Department of Art and Ms Michelle Siciliano, Education Officer at the John Curtin Gallery, have developed a programme of lectures by staff from across the University that interrogate the meanings embedded within the works and within the curatorial strategy that has drawn them together. The lecture programme is linked to a visual culture theory unit for second and third year students. The aim of the unit is to encourage students to apply these understandings to artworks in situ, thus much of the student's time is spent in galleries in front of artwork discussing with their peers their interpretations. An additional aspect of the unit is the emphasis upon arts writing, encouraging many students to overcome their word phobia and develop skills in writing for art. Thus students develop skills in both oral and written communication that can assist them in the field after graduation.

To capture staff from other disciplines outside the arts, the Yale University Art Gallery developed a project titled 'Label Talk', inviting three academics from different academic specializations to develop an exhibition of ten works for which they each separately wrote labels that were also published in a catalogue. The different perspectives on the same artworks not only created an exciting exhibition but also made it immediately relevant to entirely new groups of students.

Within Australia and in a number of American universities, gallery staff offer a Museum Studies, Curatorial or Professional Practice course at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Some are fully accredited BA or MA programmes<sup>6</sup>, others are only one-semester units but all have the advantage of directly involving the gallery with the core business of teaching and learning.

In several of the larger American universities such as Stanford, Harvard and Yale, the galleries on campus are seen as key agencies for the development and distribution of knowledge to a wider audience. At Yale, the Centre for British Art<sup>7</sup> has established a programme to develop observational skills for medical students. Diagnosis is an essential aspect of training young medical professionals but one weakness is their visual acuity, so instead of expecting them to immediately analyse and interpret visual data, they are asked to look closely at artworks within the collection and record what they see in simple language. With control groups undertaking standard methods of training, the researchers have shown that those who engage with the art programme are able to look more closely and observe more accurately.

Although the programme at the Yale Centre for British Art is very successful, any teaching undertaken by staff at the Centre has to be done in addition to their curatorial or administrative work. As the vast majority of staff employed in university galleries are on General not Academic awards<sup>8</sup>, their working conditions and their ability to contribute to the teaching and research work of their University is restricted. Indeed in some universities in the USA<sup>9</sup>, strict union regulations make it impossible for staff to teach at all and require a tenure-tract faculty member to be in attendance when gallery staff attend formal classes. In many other universities around the USA and in Australia, the impediments are less formal but no less inhibiting.

#### Research And Development

Both the teaching and learning and research and development roles of a University Art Gallery are cogently expressed in the Stanford President's notion of the gallery as a 'resource for inquiry, scholarship and enjoyment'. It was this commitment to scholarship that led the University to establish the Iris & B.Gerald Cantor Centre for Visual Arts as a Research Centre headed by a director who is also a full professor with an endowed chair. The Yale Centre for British Art was similarly conceived as a research centre when it was established through a generous donation by Paul Mellon and charged with the responsibility of documenting and researching the collection.

Many universities in Australia, the USA and Britain set up 'teaching collections' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to facilitate and encourage research. As well as acting as models for practice, the artworks collected were the object of scholarly inquiry because as Peter Stanbury explained in a recent survey of University art galleries in Campus Review;

University collections contain unique records that are fundamental to teaching or research and which inform liberal education. (However) Few universities provide easy access to the information stored in their collections, even though most have digital records.<sup>10</sup>

This restricted access is largely a product of funding constraints and the inability of already overworked staff to facilitate visits by staff, students or visiting academics, however it does limit the research that might be undertaken.

A number of American university art galleries and museums do make their print collections available for research and this has resulted in exciting and innovative research projects as well as rejuvenating the teaching practice of academics. At the Hammer Gallery, University of California Los Angeles, the Grunwald Centre for Graphic Arts<sup>11</sup> provides a comprehensive overview of graphic work from the Renaissance to the present day, offering students studying across a range of disciplines within Humanities, but also those in science and medicine, access to primary source material. The basis for research and a tool to illustrate points raised in lectures and seminars, the collection is readily accessed by students, faculty and external bona-fide researchers. At the University of Richmond, the Joel and Lila Harnett Print Study Centre serves a similar function and, because of the strong holdings in photographs and prints from the Civil War, one of the courses in history is held in the Centre where faculty members can illustrate their lectures with this original material.

At the University of California Berkeley, they have tackled this problem by embedding the methodologies of the gallery within the mind set and terminology of the university. Staff in the Museum of Fine Arts not only promote the idea of the collection as reference material for research, but more importantly, they promote their own unique contribution as interpreters of that material, providing valuable content that

expands the general base of knowledge. In this way, they have been able to incorporate a lot of what they do into the field of research as generally accepted by the University<sup>12</sup>.

To further connect with this research culture, they have created an inventory of staff involved in cutting edge research across diverse fields with whom they liaise to explore how the gallery can facilitate their work and promote it to a wider audience. In a similar programme at Stanford's Cantor Centre, this has led to exhibitions that reflected aspects of the research of Nobel Prize winners across a range of disciplines. Another example of redefining the role of the gallery has led a small university like the State University of San Francisco to re-conceptualised its Fine Arts Museum as a Research Unit for the Comparative Study of Race, Ethnicity and Culture. The Centre, run by Mark Johnson, Associate Professor and Director<sup>13</sup>, has received funding from the Ford Foundation to examine the range of cultural practices among the diverse national and ethnic communities around the Bay Area (including the Chinese, Japanese, Hispanic and American Indian). With this focus they have produced some formidable publications and some excellent exhibitions that have attracted international attention.

At the John Curtin Gallery, the Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth (BEAP), first held in 2002, focused attention on research into digital technology from across many disciplines within the University. Initiated by Paul Thomas, a lecturer within the Department of Art, it aimed to showcase the University's activities as a centre for research in this field by attracting leading international artists and researchers for a series of exhibitions at venues across the city and a programme of conferences, seminars and public lectures. BEAP showed that the gallery could be a catalyst for new work and a showcase for those achievements. Indeed the forthcoming BEAP will include a number of artworks created specifically for the exhibitions and also generate substantial research that will be presented in the associated conference.

Unfortunately, what is generally overlooked is the research work gallery staff undertake in their role as custodians of this material and as curators preparing exhibitions. Because most are general staff and because galleries are aligned differently within every university - some assigned to the marketing portfolio, others to the Vice-Chancellery some to teaching schools - their work is frequently unacknowledged in the research output of the university.

Although the catalogues produced by university galleries around Australia form one of the most comprehensive and current records of contemporary practice in this country, they are often dismissed as 'vanity publishing' because the work is done in-house and hence gallery staff do not receive the formal academic acknowledgement for their work.

Despite the fact that a great deal of essential primary research into Australia's visual culture is undertaken and that a significant percentage of the publications on contemporary Australian art are generated from within these institutions, their contribution is marginalised.<sup>14</sup>

#### Public Programmes

Peter Stanbury commented in a recent article in Campus Review that 'the university museums are an open doorway for communities to access the campus'. It is a theme reiterated by his Vice-Chancellor Professor Di Yerbury.

Universities are public authorities and beings so part of our role is to serve the public... That mission is threefold - research, teaching and learning, and engagement with the community or outreach... So it's not a peripheral activity to engage in the arts and use it (for) outreach to the public.<sup>15</sup>

The country's university art galleries have been very successful in this area of public engagement and some, through their positioning on major thoroughfares<sup>16</sup>, attract substantial audiences. Additionally, through touring exhibitions, both nationally and internationally<sup>17</sup>, and by attracting school groups onto campus, the university galleries provide a significant marketing opportunity and a ready point of access for members of the community.

Despite the difficulties of insurance and the increasing bureaucracy facing teachers wishing to arrange school visits, they are often student's first contact with universities and hence their importance cannot be

over-estimated. One strategy to overcome this problem is the Mobile Art Quest (MAQ) trailer with a small exhibition of works managed by the Blaffer Gallery in Houston and sent out to primary schools in the area for a week of art activities run by Art Education students. Also at the Blaffer, they have re-conceptualised the exhibition programme as an Artlab, an approach to curating exhibitions that begins with the premise of challenging students and members of the public to engage in a dialogue with ideas and artworks.<sup>18</sup>

Another important feature on many campuses across the country are the large number of commissioned public artworks that enhance the environment of the university. As well as 'humanising' the workplace they have become important community resources.<sup>19</sup>

While there is still a great deal more to be achieved in this area, it is the one aspect of the activities of university galleries that does receive general recognition from senior managers.

### Conclusion

University art galleries directly contribute to the culture and society in which they exist and through the professional and scholarly work they undertake are a significant and essential partner in both documenting existing work and generating new cultural projects.

Nevertheless, the economic imperative for university art galleries is to show how they do contribute to these core goals despite the considerable impediments they face.

As we know, Cinderella returned to the drudgery of her working life after the ball, once more relegated to the role of cleaner and custodian of other's valuables while waiting patiently for Prince Charming to elevate her to a position of eminence and authority. No one can argue with her success though it would be a bold commentator who suggested a similar strategy for the country's university art museums.

Ted Snell

### Illustrations

Photographer Ted Snell, no copyright clearance required.  
Images included within the document, JPEG's attached



Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre  
for the Visual Arts at Stanford University



Busch-Reisinger Gallery, Fogg Museum, Harvard University



Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre  
for the Visual Arts at Stanford University

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<sup>1</sup> See *Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia*, The Report of the University Museums Review Committee, AV-CC, 1996

<sup>2</sup> See *Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia*, The Report of the University Museums Review Committee, AV-CC, 1996

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Casper, President Stanford University, *Building on the Past: The making of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre for Visual Arts*, Richard Joncas, 1999, Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, p7.

<sup>4</sup> *The Whitworth Art Gallery: The First Hundred Years*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester University, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Some key examples of purpose-build galleries opened over the past five years include the John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University (1998), the Ian Potter Museum of Art at Melbourne University (1998), the Icon Gallery at Burwood as part of Deakin University's Melbourne Campus (2003) and galleries within art schools like the Faculty Gallery at Monash (1999), the Tasmanian Academy of the Arts Inveresk in Launceston (2002) and the Queensland College of Art at Griffith (2002)

<sup>6</sup> The Master of Arts in Critical /Curatorial Studies at UCLA and a similar programme at the California College of Art and Craft (CCAC) are good examples.

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Friendlaender, Director of Education, has received international recognition for this project, which is currently under consideration by other American universities.

<sup>8</sup> In the USA they are often faculty but not tenure track faculty and hence work under very different conditions

<sup>9</sup> The Rhode Island School of Design is an example.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Stanbury, 'Identity Parade', Galleries, Arts and Museums, Educational Review, *Campus Review* Vol 13, No 14, April 16-22, p22.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly the focus on prints and works on paper, though prompted by a large donation of works, developed as a result of funding difficulties and the decision to focus on the purchase of more affordable works by significant artists.

<sup>12</sup> A range of Seminars and Symposia support this approach with a University-wide focus picking up on issues current around campus and run in association with the exhibition programme.

<sup>13</sup> With a very diverse student body (53% are of Asian heritage) the University has embraced this project and proudly promotes the research centre status of the gallery.

<sup>14</sup> Balancing the often-competing demands of securing sponsorship while maintaining the freedom to pursue scholarly research is now a major challenge for University Art Galleries. Similarly, the difficulty of building collections in a climate of shrinking acquisitions budgets has led to a dependency on donations and raised a potential danger of skewing the focus of these collections. This may well be the major challenge in the coming decades.

<sup>15</sup> Professor Di Yerbury, quoted in 'Arts at centre stage', Galleries, Arts and Museums, Educational Review, *Campus Review* Vol 13, No 14, April 16-22, p23.

<sup>16</sup> The RMIT Gallery on Swanston Street in Melbourne attracts in the vicinity of 70,000 visitors a year.

<sup>17</sup> The benefits that accrued to Monash after curating the Venice Biennale exhibition of Patricia Piccinini's work in the Australian pavilion this year and to Curtin University of Technology from OZGold, an exhibition of contemporary Australian jewellery, curated by the John Curtin Gallery in collaboration with the Australian Gold Council, which toured to all states with the exception of Tasmania in 2002 need to be quantified to reinforce the role of these galleries in promoting the public image of their institutions.

<sup>18</sup> The exhibition programme has an outreach component that attracts an audience to the gallery and then through tours visitors are challenged by open-ended questions rather than lectured to by student docents.

<sup>19</sup> The 'percent for art' scheme that allocates a percentage of the cost of building to commissioned artworks has greatly increased the number and the scale of public artworks on Australian campuses.