

ANATOMY OF AN EXHIBITION

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Although the curated exhibition is no more than 150 years old it is now the principle format for making an argument with objects and artworks. Both a catalyst for engaging an audience and a meeting ground for artists, museum professionals, educators, academics and other researchers it provides the opportunity to develop ideas and explore the potential of objects, images and texts to communicate meaning.

Art schools and art galleries within universities are in a perfect position to affect the exhibition format while employing it as a way of showcasing their own achievements in the core areas of teaching & learning and research & development.

In this paper I will examine how exhibitions can contribute to the research and teaching and learning environment. Using *sacred ground beating heart: works by Judy Watson 1989-2003* as a case-study I will examine the potential for exhibitions to enhance cross-disciplinary research initiatives, build institutional collaborations and create international linkages.

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The curated exhibition has become the sanctioned mode of presentation for artworks. Although its history is no more than 150 years old, initiated by Gustav Courbet's solo exhibition outside the Salon des Refuses in 1855¹, it has become the accepted - almost the exclusively authorized - format for presenting artworks to an audience. Not surprisingly the same decisions Courbet confronted - how to hang the pictures to construct meaning and reinforce the relationship between different works, which works to include and which to leave out - have remained key strategies in devising an exhibition and developing the curatorial thesis that underpins the project. According to Rachel Weiss from the Art Institute of Chicago:

'Exhibitions are inherently reductive in that they select certain objects to the exclusion of all others in order to construct a narrative or argument that is deemed important. In its broadest sense, exhibiting can be seen as a conveyer of fundamental philosophical principles underlying societies, first of all with their taxonomic assumptions reflecting a general rationalist consensus which has existed for centuries in the West and, further, in the particularities of the interpretations of meaning and value that the exhibition is structured according to.'²

As Weiss points out, exhibitions are principally a discourse and hence the very idea of an exhibition presupposes an audience and a level of engagement or interaction. The exhibition is both a catalyst for engaging that audience and a meeting ground where artists, museum professionals, educators, academics and other researchers develop ideas and explore the potential of the relationship of images and texts to communicate meanings.

In this context the University Art Gallery has an important role to play. James Cuno, formerly Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard University Art

¹ Brian O'Doherty suggests that Courbet was the first radical artist to set up his own gallery space and hang his pictures and construct the context for his pictures and '...therefore editorialise about its values.' *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Lapis Press, Santa Monica, 1986

² Rachel Weiss 'Some notes on the agency of exhibitions' *Western Australian Art No:5, Scan: 129 Western Australian Artists*, Visual Culture Research Unit, Curtin University of Technology, 1999, pp8-17.

Museums, described the special responsibility of the 'research university academic art museum' in the following way:

... we should not only be keeping and presenting our collections, but should also be holding the conventions of curatorship up to close and rigorous scrutiny, examining the nature of our professional practice and of the institution of the museum itself... we should assume a special role within our profession and academic discipline. That is our mission.³

Cuno's analysis of the role of his own institution brings together the key concerns of teaching and learning, research and development and public programmes, all conceived within the unique relationship that exists within the university. The self-reflexive role he ascribes to university galleries, and I would add to university art schools, is vitally important because it adds another dimension to our activities: '... to take seriously our role as scholars and to celebrate the circumstances that encourage scholarship.'⁴

Self-reflexive exhibitions, those that examine the nature of the exhibition and build within the process of curation a critique of the act of exhibiting, are not new. Martha Ward asserts⁵ that Jacques Louis David's use of mirrors in his 1799 exhibition in the Louvre to enable his audience to view the works directly and indirectly as illusion in the mirror, was an early example, but it has become a significant component of the process of designing and conceptualising exhibitions that do more than just present a series of artworks within a gallery space. Our aim should be to engage, inspire and reward audiences by revealing the exhibition's structure, by exploring the larger interpretive framework within which the works can be read and by acknowledging the nature of the process that has led to the selection and its mode of presentation. That is not to suggest that the curatorial process is one of homogenising or simplifying or even pasteurising ideas or images, indeed the opposite is true and all exhibitions require work and commitment from the audience. As Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate, explains:

My task, and that of other curators, is to build the confidence that will allow visitors to accept that an understanding of contemporary values and ideas will often be provoked by new forms of art. The most radical art has always been disturbing and for this reason has been attacked by conservatives. Art should overturn as well as confirm values. We need to welcome and to be able to live with uncertainties in our lives ... there will not always be an answer to every question. Art obliges us to answer questions for ourselves.⁶

Within this context the curated exhibition is clearly a tool we can use to present the work of the university to a wider audience. Its ability to present open-ended propositions and multiple readings can both showcase research while providing an environment and resources for teaching and learning. It also offers the potential to continually examine both the nature of our practice and the ways in which it is translated to an audience through the format of the exhibition, and as Cuno declares '... that is our mission'.

With those parameters in mind I want to use one project at the John Curtin Gallery to show how an exhibition can meet the research agenda of the institution, how it can develop an important argument, how it can engage audiences within and outside

³ James Cuno, *OCCASIONAL PAPER No. 2*, 1994, Defining the Mission of the Academic Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Op Cit* Weiss p12

⁶ Sir Nicholas Serota, Dimpleby Lecture BBC 2000

the University to interact with those propositions and by taking a self-reflexive stance can open up the exhibition process to scrutiny and evaluation. A survey exhibition of the work of contemporary Indigenous artist Judy Watson met the criteria outlined in the exhibition policy⁷ of the Gallery and additionally it had the potential to engage a number of the teaching schools and hence a number of different audiences within the University. Additionally with support from Asialink it had the potential to travel, thus making it easier to secure sponsorship and funding support and providing the additional bonus for the University of carrying it's name far a field and for the artist of gaining increased international exposure. The proposal was for a major survey exhibition of Judy Watson's work from her first solo exhibition in 1989 up to and including 2003, with the hope that it would also incorporate an installation-based work developed during her residency in the Department of Art and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies. The scope of this project required all three Gallery exhibition spaces and the Atrium space as well, so it was a major decision requiring considerable commitment of University resources. Nevertheless, its potential to integrate the research and teaching & learning activities of various Departments and Faculties within the University was the deciding factor in our decision to proceed. The research component was multifaceted. Firstly the project provided an opportunity to actively investigate the nature of a survey exhibition, one of the standard forms of presentation for contemporary art. Following Cuno's exhortation that the University Gallery is well placed to undertake this kind of research and must accept the responsibility of holding '...the conventions of curatorship up to close and rigorous scrutiny...' it seemed incumbent upon us to take on this role and construct an informative narrative that would describe and elucidate Watson's career. Although well known her work has not received the level of critical attention it deserves so there was also the opportunity to bring together a number of scholars⁸ to contribute to the catalogue and so increase the corpus of published critical writing on her work. *sacred ground beating heart: works by Judy Watson 1989-2003* is the first survey exhibition of the artist's work. Despite a remarkable career in every respect, including selection for major international exhibitions and residencies, national exhibitions and numerous awards, there has been no comprehensive exhibition charting her achievements. Yet Judy Watson's work is important for Australians, particularly at this time in our history as we move towards reconciling the past and preparing for a shared future built upon understanding and respect. Her work speaks eloquently of the suffering of Aboriginal Australians, the massacres, prejudice and disdain, while simultaneously evoking the dignity and achievements of Aboriginal people. A contemporary artist she bridges both cultures and works in the space between to create a powerful image of reconciliation and understanding. The curatorial thesis was then to present her work over the past fifteen years, since her first solo exhibition in 1988, focusing on her highly personal vision of the land, the physical and conceptual framework that underpins her practice and several other themes that also emerged from the initial research, which was undertaken with the assistance of a volunteer researcher. The first was the notion of 'country', a concept that embraces both macro and micro notions of belonging and ownership. It is as Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn have

⁷ The exhibition was by a contemporary indigenous artist, it contributed to the general direction of the University's collection policy, it facilitated audience development and community participation and it had the potential to generate debate.

⁸ As well as myself, Julie Ewington, Louise Martin-Chew and Hetti Perkins all contributed to the catalogue.

suggested 'simultaneously concept and place'.⁹ Indeed, country is a word that Watson uses often when talking about her work, as she identifies specific sources for paintings, locates them within the landscape and takes possession of them in a more holistic sense as the starting point for her poetic images. Although her paintings are clearly landscapes the fundamental orienting feature of most western landscape painting is missing, there is no horizon.

When people fly over the country, they see the country through Aboriginal eyes. I think that has changed people's perceptions of Aboriginal art ... I try to paint the land from both above and beneath to integrate the body with country.¹⁰

For Watson, a Waanyi woman from North West Queensland, her country is her grandmother's land around Lawn Hill Gorge and Riversleigh Station, which she visited in 1990 with her family. Making connections back to country is vitally important for Indigenous Australians, it is at the core of identity, the thing that shapes and guides the sense of self and provides the base for understanding others. As Watson has written:

when you walk in that country
the earth is beating pulsating heat, blood, heart
things are hidden
like the bones of the people who have been there before
you are walking in their footprints.¹¹

It is this layered history that makes her work so potent at a time when we are seeking to make peace with our past. Vivien Johnson¹² has described the painting process as capturing '... a moment of connectedness' and for Watson it is a vital and powerful way of linking with her grandmother and with all those who have gone before.

Another important theme that emerged when researching Watson's work was the importance of travel. Rather than limiting her to one place, one country, this highly personal engagement with country and the stories it evokes has encouraged Watson to move through other lands as a traveller '... collecting information, materials and meaning from places other than my own country'.¹³ She is a peripatetic, someone who travels in connection with their vocation, driven to find out more, to discover the similarities and differences, to test her realities against others in Italy, Norway, Canada, India, Kalgoorlie, France and the Kimberley. In 'cumulus', her exhibition at 24 Hour Art in Darwin and Mori Gallery in Sydney during 2001, the country she described was not only that of her grandmother but also others she has acquired through travel and encounter. She explains that when she travels she 'carries her culture with her' and so these new lands are appropriated into a broader geography of belonging. Her experiences are annexed and drawn together into a layered landscape of memory and interaction, of personal imprints and the presence of unseen others. Instead of adopting a fixed notion of identity her art is, as Victoria Lynn has suggested '... a refreshing metaphor for the gaps that exist between different cultural experiences'.¹⁴

⁹ Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn, *Australian Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 1993, p11.

¹⁰ Quoted by Ben Holgate in 'Beneath the Earth', *The Weekend Australian*, February 24-25, 2001 p11.

¹¹ Judy Watson, *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art*, catalogue, Artspace, Sydney 1991

¹² Vivien Johnson 'Upon a painted emotion', *Art & Australia* Vol 30 No: 2, Summer 1992 p238

¹³ Judy Watson, *Beyond the Pale: Contemporary Indigenous Art*, Brenda Croft, 2000 Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000, p90.

¹⁴ Victoria Lynn, 'Judy Watson: Map/Dream/Journey', *Antipodean Currents: 10 contemporary Artists from Australia*, Guggenheim Museum Soho, New York, 1995.

Examining those linkages with country was then a key element in planning the exhibition and the notion of a journey through various countries and places became one of the strategies in devising the exhibition. We did not present the work chronologically in the hang¹⁵ but rather chose to show connections between various works made in response to place and also to those that raised specific issues about the history of these sites. Some like *evidence* refer to the massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia and in particular to the Connistan Massacre, one of the last in Australia's written history. This diptych is a very powerful evocation of the horrors of the event, the bleached bones methodically laid out in the left panel while the right hand panel seems to suggest simultaneously an X-ray image of a bone or a distant view of the land. Both intimately engaged yet also distanced she suggests it is our decision to choose our own sense of involvement. With few images in our national archive to record these events Watson's paintings serve as a concrete point of reference, a rallying point and a memorial.

This and other works in the show such as *cleaning up history* and *blood and bone* were hung in proximity to reinforce the powerful message of reconciliation based around a shared understanding and acknowledgement of past atrocities. These themes were also elaborated in the three catalogue essays and in an interview with the artist by Hetti Perkins.

Finally, the materials Watson uses and the techniques she employs reflect both her humility and her celebration of the work of women. The paintings on the walls are like banners, or sheets hanging on a line, they 'move and breathe on the wall'¹⁶, there is a blurring between the world of art and the world they inhabit, an 'edgelessness'¹⁷ that encourages engagement and connection. Unlike much of the assertive and arrogant work of late modernism there is a 'grounded-ness' in her practice that encourages contact, draws you into the subtleties of the surface, envelopes you in their story¹⁸. Protecting this sense of humility and 'informality' within the presentation was another important aspect of the project and the works were pinned alongside drawings, which were also pinned to the wall rather than framed.

Once the central themes of the exhibition were established the major task was to find the works that would best convey those messages to an audience within the gallery environment. With any exhibition the major decision is what to select and how to choose between so many competing works. As Rachel Weiss explained in an earlier quote '... exhibitions are inherently reductive, in that they select certain objects to the exclusion of all others in order to construct a narrative or argument that is deemed important'.¹⁹ Keeping in mind the need to explore the concerns outlined above, to provide a summation of a period of practice and where possible to indicate future directions and reinforce the artist's position within Australian art and internationally, decisions were made to exclude some works in favour of others, including the decision to include drawings and prints to further explain the ways in which imagery evolves.

Although research was central there was also a teaching and learning component that involved students in the Department of Art (students in the mainstream BA and the Associate Degree in Aboriginal Art) and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies. We had also hoped to involve an Indigenous trainee curator but our application for funds for this aspect of the project failed and the opportunity was lost.

¹⁵ However, in respect for the exhibition's various audiences the works were listed chronologically in the publication.

¹⁶ See Louise Martin Chew 'Judy Watson's art of the spirit' in this publication.

¹⁷ *op cit* Hannah Fink p28.

¹⁸ Initially Watson trained as a printmaker, because painting seemed 'such a high art business',¹⁸ and she was searching for a practice that was more open and available, more socially engaged and practical. Then while working on the early paintings like *sacred ground beating heart* she found she was able to manipulate materials in a more physical way and to relate to them from her personal experience.

¹⁹ *op cit* Weiss p12

Just as importantly in our decision-making was the opportunity to develop a public programme that would attract external visitors to the University. This is an important element in our planning because as Professor Di Yerbury the Vice-Chancellor at Macquarie University explains:

Universities are public authorities and being so part of our role is to serve the public... The University's mission is threefold – research, teaching & learning, and engagement with the community or outreach... So it's not a peripheral activity to engage in the arts and to use it (for) outreach to the public.²⁰

The Education and Access Co-ordinator at the John Curtin Gallery established a section at the outside the main galleries as an 'Art Making Space' where kids could come in and draw collaboratively on large sheets of paper or contribute 'finger bones' made of clay to a larger installation organised in the Atrium space of the Gallery. This both facilitated visits from school groups as well as providing an activity for children attending the exhibition with their parents.

Additionally, because linking a residency to an exhibition had been a great success on two former occasions with Panjiti Mary McLean and Narelle Jubelin, we were keen to follow this initiative by inviting the artist to work on campus in preparation for her exhibition. Arranged in tandem with CMC TAFE it enabled her to work between the two institutions, giving very generously of her time and engaging with staff and students at both schools and providing an invaluable role model for artists in training. Having her working with the staff on the various aspects of the project also made it both a stimulating intellectual exercise and a dynamic process that changed quite frequently.

Negotiations with Asialink to send the exhibition through Asia²¹, as part of their Senior Artist programme, also assisted in building a notion of the audience and how the exhibition might be structured to engage them.

In the meantime the Collection Manager and Assistant Curator began the process of securing the necessary loans (which needed to be a full year ahead of the exhibition for public collections). Some works were unavailable due to previous commitments, some were complicated by the concerns of private lenders and one in particular was problematic because of a conservation issue²². Even though not all the works targeted were available a final list was agreed upon and the details finalised.

Once the works had arrived the installation proved to be more complex than we had thought. Watson's decision to create a large installation of bones and red sand in the centre of one gallery made demands on the hanging spaces and our joint decision to intersperse drawings and prints with the large paintings to show the evolution of the imagery complicated the installation process, requiring a great deal of trial and error. The exhibition when finally installed was different in each of the five venues but where possible the basic curatorial principles were maintained and the links back to the research agenda of the University and the need to communicate with its various audiences underpinned all aspects of the project. By integrating the exhibition in the life of the community, by linking it to the teaching and learning programme and basing it within the research agenda of the University we were able to show how exhibitions can exemplify its core business and meet the needs of its multiple audiences. Through this project we were also able to build institutional collaborations

²⁰ 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.

²¹ The exhibition was shown in Brisbane in March before opening in Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam on the 10th June, in Colombo Sri Lanka on the 5th July and Manila in the Philippines on the 5th August.

²² The AGWA refused permission to show 'animal breath' a very beautiful work they had gained through Moet and Chandon funds, because it was too fragile to shift lying flat in a truck from the City to Bentley. Despite Judy's protestations and promised conservation assistance the loan was not cleared in time and the work wasn't included in our show.

with Asialink and the IMA and create international linkages with galleries, artists and arts administrators in Sri Lanka, Vietnam and the Philippines. Rather than being peripheral or ancillary to the core business of the University the exhibition was seen by senior management and academics across many disciplines as a major tool in elaborating and showcasing its achievements to a large audience both within Australia and internationally.

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