

# Building Bridges: University Art Galleries as Agents of Community Engagement

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In light of the Research Quality Framework discussions, and in a climate where universities are required to make their activities more accessible and to be more accountable, the University Press, the University Theatre, and the University Gallery and Museum are becoming increasingly important mechanisms for showcasing the work of the institution and for the dissemination of research.

This must be achieved despite the long history of tense relationships between universities and their host communities. Initially integrated within the cities that nurtured them, the early medieval universities were nothing more than districts, like the Latin Quarter in Paris, where scholars congregated. Eventually they took over buildings and created their own boundaries behind which students and staff could feel safe to carry on their studies. Universities became sanctuaries from the diversions of city life, a place where students could address the (important) work of scholarship without the need to indulge in manual labour. This separation was encapsulated in the expression 'town and gown', which reinforced the distinction between those who laboured in the town and those who addressed the concerns of the intellect.

The Kent State Massacre in 1971 was one of the most horrific outcomes of the suspicion and resentment generated by the 'town gown' split, in this case between the citizens of Columbus and the University. The Ohio Governor, James Allen Rhodes, called the student protesters un-American and referred to them as revolutionaries set on destroying higher education in Ohio.

They're worse than the brownshirts and the communist element and also the nightriders and the vigilantes. They're the worst type of people that we harbor in America. I think that we're up against the strongest, well-trained, militant, revolutionary group that has ever assembled in America.<sup>1</sup>

Although an extreme example, the distrust, anxiety and suspicion about what happens on the segregated university campus continues to fuel comments about esoteric research undertaken by academics cut off from the harsh reality of everyday life in their 'ivory tower' offices. The notion that universities are 'out of touch' and concentrate on abstract theories with little relevance to the life around them continues to undermine attempts to reconcile gown with town. At a recent conference, Julie Bishop, the Federal Minister for Education, finished her presentation with the statement:

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<sup>1</sup> [www.may4.org](http://www.may4.org)

After all, what is the value of a university which does not work hand in hand with business to build economic growth in that university's region? What is the value of providing professional degree courses which do not reflect contemporary practice? What is the value of a university which does not strive to strengthen regional economic and social capacities?<sup>2</sup>

The imperative to tailor research and teaching to the requirements of the community is the polar swing of this attitude, undermining the potential for a university to critique these ideas and to suggest new theories and strategies to improve current procedures rather than bend to the pressure and 'reflect contemporary practice ... and strengthen economic and social capacities'.

At the core of the ongoing problematical relationship between university's and their host communities is the dual life universities lead, as both 'in' the world and 'separate from it', inextricably bound by the commercial interests and formal relationships with their communities yet necessarily 'a place apart',<sup>3</sup> with a mandate to react critically and disinterestedly. Balancing the relationship with their host communities has always been difficult and universities have frequently swung back and forth between the poles of either developing closer ties or acting as an entirely separate community. However, in light of the current climate of accountability promoted by successive ministers in the Howard Government, universities are now required to embrace Community Engagement along with Teaching & Learning and Research & Development as part of their contract with government. Building Bridges with local communities has become, and clearly will continue to be, an essential platform of every university's mission statement.

For the arts, this is less problematic than for some other disciplines, for by their nature the arts need an audience and have traditionally sought an avenue to engage their communities in a dialogue about current issues. Indeed, the arts through theatre, dance and music performance, screenings, publications and exhibitions have traditionally been the point of public access for many universities.

The former Vice Chancellor of Macquarie University, Professor Di Yerbury, embraced the imperative for Community Engagement and used it as a rationale for supporting her University's arts agenda.

Universities are public authorities and being so part of our role is to serve the public... she says. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Bishop, *Knowledge Transfer and Engagement Forum Keynote Address*, Crown Plaza, Darling Harbour, Sydney 16 June 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See Stuart Macintyre & Simon Marginson 'The University and its Public' in T. Coody (ed.) *Why Universities Matter: A Conversation About Values, Means and Directions*. (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000) pp.49-71.

<sup>4</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 2004, p.23.

Since their establishment one hundred and fifty years ago,<sup>5</sup> universities in Australia have commissioned and collected artworks to enrich the cultural milieu of their institutions and, by osmosis, ensure their graduates develop as fully rounded individuals with a balanced education that includes a knowledge of the arts through contact with their own and other cultures. For Sir Redmond Barry, first Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, this enlightened education was an essential ingredient that would bind the fledgling colony together because of the 'socially adhesive qualities'<sup>6</sup> of cultural activities.

Gerhard Casper, President of Stanford University, home to the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Visual Arts (one of the world's larger University Galleries) concurs:

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>7</sup>

That two-fold mission of providing a centre for research while concurrently enriching community life remains a catalyst for many universities. Certainly, over the past five years the inclusion of new galleries as part of the refurbishment or construction of purpose-built facilities for art schools and the opening of new or renovated gallery spaces on university campuses is evidence of a continuing commitment to their mission as custodians and interpreters of our visual culture.

In Victoria, in September 2005, the State Government Department of Education, Employment and Training produced a massive report *Beyond Rhetoric: University-Community Engagement in Victoria*<sup>8</sup> to articulate the advantages of collaboration to both the university sector and the wider community. While acknowledging that all the Victorian universities are culturally engaged with the community through public lectures, art exhibitions and cultural production such as dance, theatre and performance they admit that '... the role of universities as contributors to community engagement and a social justice agenda is difficult to quantify.'<sup>9</sup>

For the universities themselves there was also a confusion of roles, some suggesting this activity is nothing more than a public relations exercise, while others vehemently support the view that community engagement '... can contribute to public debate, community wellbeing and local revival'.

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<sup>5</sup> The art collections of the University of Sydney began with the foundation of the University itself in 1850 (see *The University of Sydney Exhibition: Pictures from the Collection*, catalogue, Pamela Bell, University of Sydney, 1988, p.7).

<sup>6</sup> Sir Redmond Barry was the first Chancellor when the University of Melbourne was established by an Act of the Victorian Parliament in 1853, [see *Treasures: Highlights of the Cultural Collections of the University of Melbourne*, Eds. Chris McAuliffe & Peter Yule (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2003) p.23].

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Casper, President Stanford University, *Building on the Past: The Making of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre for Visual Arts*, Richard Joncas, Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, 1999, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Published on the net at [http://www.highered.vic.gov.au/news/australian\\_uni.asp](http://www.highered.vic.gov.au/news/australian_uni.asp)

<sup>9</sup> *Beyond Rhetoric: University-Community Engagement in Victoria*, 2005.

This view is articulated in the response from the University of Melbourne, which describes its involvement in the community as follows:

... a university must be both a place apart where learning is not constrained by local horizons as well as being thoroughly grounded in its local community ... A major purpose of the university is helping local communities of students and neighbours to go beyond localness through education and training that provide critical appreciation of local beliefs and boundaries and open up new communities of association.<sup>10</sup>

This would seem to be a fundamental principle of community engagement, and a platform for developing the programme of any University Museum or Art Gallery trying to meet the directives to be more responsive to their local communities.

However, while the public relations component of community engagement can be more easily measured - through the number of events held, visitation rates, column inches in the press etc. – the notion of the university as a ‘site of contemplation and critical evaluation of cultural traditions ... (enabling) development of an independent perspective from which to view contemporary life’<sup>11</sup> is more difficult to quantify.

So how is this achieved and what can university art galleries contribute to their host institutions in meeting this agenda of building bridges with their local communities? University art galleries are in an excellent position to critically engage with different ideas and to offer both a vision beyond the local while providing a critical appreciation of local beliefs. One way they can do this is through their collections, which focus a particular lens on the local by creating a repository of artefacts and images that documents aspects of community life and activity that might otherwise be overlooked. As James Cuno, currently President and CEO of the Art Institute of Chicago points out: ‘Our permanent collections define our museums. They represent an extraordinary commitment on behalf of the public and are the artistic heritage we pass on to future generations.’<sup>12</sup>

The universities of Australia are a national treasure-trove. With well over forty collections and approximately thirty galleries their holdings constitute a significant quota of the nation’s cultural heritage and through their annual programme of exhibitions, supported by publications and scholarly work of various kinds, they are a vibrant component of Australia’s cultural life.

For example, the University of Melbourne has a massive collection of over twenty-five thousand items acquired through purchase, commission and donation through its long history and reflecting ‘shifting visions of the role of art and education alike’<sup>13</sup>. While most universities have

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<sup>10</sup> *Melbourne University: Serving Wider Communities*, Australian Universities as Sites of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility (Victoria), p.3.

<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/highered/postsece/MelbourneUni.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> *Melbourne University: Serving Wider Communities*, Australian Universities as Sites of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility (Victoria), p.7.

<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/highered/postsece/MelbourneUni.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> James Cuno, *Occasional Paper No. 5*, 1998 *Going Public: Art Museums and Acquisitions, Now and in the Future*, Harvard University Museums.

<sup>13</sup> *Treasures: Highlights of the Cultural Collections of the University of Melbourne*, Eds. Chris McAuliffe & Peter Yule (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2003), p.23.

much smaller holdings (between 1 and 5,000 items) they are often significant because of their focus. From its foundation, Monash University established a strong contemporary character to its collection by acquiring works that document 'important developments in contemporary Australian art through the work of emerging and established artists'<sup>14</sup>.

Like many university galleries, Curtin University has also chosen this focus on the contemporary art of its community with the decision to build a strong collection of 'local' work to both reinforce its place in the region and to provide a valuable resource for research into its creative aspirations and achievements. As a result, important histories are now well documented. The University's collection was a catalyst for a recent exhibition at the John Curtin Gallery. The confluence of ideas that merged in the late sixties and early seventies in Western Australia was transformed into an energised vision of the local that was informed by some of the most interesting and audacious art arriving from London.

*Conflux* examined this convergence of ideas drawn from artworks held in the Curtin University Art Collection and in particular from the magnificent donation of British printmaking given to the University in 2004 by Dr Douglas Kagi. The policy of collecting the work of graduates enabled me to trawl back through the collection and provide a response to a later donation of works, not only providing a context for the new acquisitions but also significantly extending the information around local practice through the juxtaposition of these two bodies of work.

The responsibilities that accrue with such large collections require considerable resources both to maintain and expand their holdings, but universities also contribute in other ways to the community. In particular, they greatly enhance their local environment through the commissioning and installation of public artworks on their campuses. This has been a major factor in fostering large-scale public sculptural installations across the cities of Australia. Most often these commissions are developed in tandem with architects vying to create a daring new building to reflect the dynamic vision of the institution. As a result of this commitment to engage with their local communities, the nation's universities have over the last decade built new galleries in Western Australia, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and another is under construction in South Australia and in Melbourne there are three major university galleries built over the past decade. Nonda Katsalidis' Ian Potter Museum of Art on Swanston Street, Ashton Raggatt McDougall's Storey Hall complex at RMIT and the smaller ICON gallery on Deakin University's Burwood campus designed by WHP architects, link architectural innovation with community responsibility and a commitment to the new.

Most importantly though, universities have a role in building civic responsibility and social capital as the *Bettertogether: The Arts and Social Capital* report explains:

The arts can nurture social capital by strengthening friendships, helping communities to understand and celebrate their heritage, and providing a safe way to discuss and solve social problems.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jenepher Duncan, *Monash University Collection: Four Decades of Collecting*, (Melbourne: Monash University, 2002), p.17.

<sup>15</sup> *Bettertogether: The Arts and Social Capital*, Saguaro Seminar Report on Civic Engagement in America, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, December 2000.

This outreach capability draws upon the idea of the university being more than a place of teaching and learning and education of the professions. It is an extension of the university's role as a privileged site to contemplate, discuss and express views about the economic, political and social issues of the day. Universities have a profoundly important role in enhancing the civic foundations of democracy by providing a site where ideas can be shared, discussed and debated in public forums.<sup>16</sup> University Galleries are well placed to undertake this role because of their position within institutions where applied research into many aspects of community life is ongoing.

Last year, the John Curtin Gallery presented an exhibition that examined the connections between Indigenous healing and the vibrant visual arts practice of Aboriginal Australia. *Indigenous Art & Healing* was initially planned as a showcase for some of the extraordinary contemporary Aboriginal artworks donated to the Gallery over the past five years, but in the process of curating the show the connections with Indigenous Health and research undertaken by the Division of Health Sciences and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies skewed the project in exciting directions. As a result it was decided to focus on the links between art and healing within many Indigenous communities.

The premise of the exhibition grew from the idea of 'wellbeing' as outlined in the Geneva Declaration on the health and survival of Indigenous Peoples, affirming:

... that cultural identity and expression is essential to a people's wellbeing. It connects Indigenous health and resilience with rights to express relationship to land, reciprocal justice, family and kinship ties, language, stories, writings, art, theatre, music, dance and games<sup>17</sup>.

As such, the relationship between art, health and wellbeing within Indigenous communities is inextricably linked to the notion of country, a spiritual link with the land that lies at the core of cultural identity and offers a sense of belonging.

The works chosen for the exhibition were drawn from the Curtin University of Technology Art collection and works from the private collection of Dr Jo Lagerberg and Dr Stephen Swift, to reflect upon this relationship between traditional Indigenous healing techniques and art practices within communities across the Western half of Australia.

As well as showcasing current research undertaken by areas within the University the exhibition and concurrent public programme provided a resource for teaching within those courses while introducing the wider community to some key issues in the management and promotion of Indigenous health.

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<sup>16</sup> *Melbourne University: Serving Wider Communities*, Australian Universities as Sites of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility (Victoria) p.6.

<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/highered/postsece/MelbourneUni.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> *The Geneva Declaration On The Health And Survival Of Indigenous Peoples* World Health Organization Consultation On Indigenous Health Geneva, 23-26 November 1999.

A university gallery is ideally placed to tackle these questions and to take seriously the exhortation to act as a 'site of contemplation and critical evaluation'. This is an increasingly important role that goes beyond the niceties of community engagement and does more than just add colour to the local scenery. By digging deep and enabling individuals to go 'beyond localness' by providing 'critical appreciation of local beliefs and opening up new communities of association',<sup>18</sup> the university art gallery can make a major contribution to encouraging debate and discussion on issues central to the lives of those living in neighbouring communities.

As James Cuno reminds us, universities have special responsibilities in this arena because of their privileged position.

Although of it, we are not like the world. Our special circumstances—part of a college or university campus—require of us a special response to the world, a response in which differences of opinion are taken seriously and given their due, free of the pressures that sometimes limit the free and creative exchange of differing ideas in the world beyond the academy.<sup>19</sup>

Building bridges with the cities they share and contributing to the cultural life of their community while offering a critical examination of its intertwining histories is a significant, and an increasingly important, role for the nation's university art galleries.

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<sup>18</sup> *Melbourne University: Serving Wider Communities*, Australian Universities as Sites of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility (Victoria), p.3.

<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/highered/postsece/MelbourneUni.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> James Cuno 'Assets? Well, Yes – of a Kind: Collections in College and University Art Museums and Galleries', *Occasional Paper No: 1*, 1992, Harvard University Art Museums.