

Contemporary Art Practice and the Public Domain

Kim Snepvangers & Dr Gay McDonald

University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts

Introduction

The thesis of this paper emerges from an understanding of the importance of the connections in art/design practice that occur between individuals within the art world and related fields of practice. The paper will use two case studies to exemplify the transformative links that are possible between contemporary art and a university art/design school. The first case study is based on a UNSW/COFA seminar titled 'Critical Junctures: ARTEXPRESS in the Public Domain' (2006), which dealt with dialogues between secondary/tertiary institutions and agencies. The second case study addresses exhibitions and contemporary art practice, and emerged from the collaborative production of an Online Education Kit developed by COFA students and staff as part of the exhibition *Terra Alterius: Land of Another* (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW/COFA, 2004).

Drawing on the international report 'Moving Forward on Arts and Education' (2006), a number of potential areas for action emerge:

- that we should regard teaching and learning in the arts as open-ended, iterative and evolving, and not necessarily content-driven;
- that educators should enhance the learning and development of both artists and educators;
- that education should increase the collaborations with other key partners.

To situate these case studies some key ideas in the field of contemporary art practice and the museum are explored, using a recent debate about the interventions of 'shopping' within museum and exhibition practice.

'Shopping' as metaphor

'In language, a metaphor...is a rhetorical trope defined as a direct comparison between two or more seemingly unrelated subjects' (Wikipedia, 2006). In this paper, the functioning of the museum is described as metaphorically similar to that of shopping. While seemingly unrelated subjects, the museum and shopping centre share many similar attributes. For example, marketing surveys are often used to enhance the museum visitor's profile (physical and virtual), and the museum visitor is described in market demographics as if they were a retail consumer.

These links between the spheres of museum and shopping mall were addressed by Bernard Lane in a recent article in *The Higher Education Supplement* (June 2006), titled 'Museums Shop for Customers'. In this article, Bernard Lane discusses a key debate raised at a recent Museums Australia 2006 conference, 'Are Shopping Centres More Engaging than Museums?' Salient in Lane's article is his discussion about the ways museums are mapping the shopping mall experience and, through new technologies, are promoting new sets of relations between the museum and its publics, as consumers.

According to Australian Museum Director Frank Howarth, the shopping centre experience needs to be recognised because of its power to attract audiences in an increasingly competitive leisure industry. Howarth both embraces and differentiates the enterprise of the museum from the *passivity* and contemporary glitz of the shopping mall experience. Some clarification is offered here to contextualise what Howarth may be alluding to in his simultaneous embrace and differentiation of shopping as a metaphor for the museum. On the surface shopping appears as an interactive experience because it requires the consumer to make choices. This act gives the consumer the perception that they are playing an active role and making authentic choices in the pseudo even-playing field of the retail world. Yet these decisions are carefully circumscribed by retailers and conform to a narrow range of economic relations. The consumer is typically rendered passive, a vessel vicariously participating in what has been presented as a novel and innovative experience but which is orthodox and endlessly repetitive. For these reasons, Howarth is careful to talk about how different shopping experiences are *selectively* used to differentiate the physical museum shop from the online museum experience.

First, he notes the importance of having a 'good shop' within the physical context of the museum. Second, Howarth emphasises the necessity to cater to the needs of rapidly rising numbers of virtual visitors, evidenced by his remark that sales from the Australian Museum's online shop have grown by 45% a year. However, in his final point, Howarth makes clear that while he is prepared to exploit the potential of the shopping experience, he retains an orthodox commitment to the core business of the museum to bring audiences to the physical site to engage in a more active way than afforded by a shopping mall, with real objects or their surrogates.

This paper explores the fundamental tension at play not just for the Australian Museum but all museums, which are increasingly compelled to borrow aspects of the shopping centre experience. The museum's principle mission is to increase the number of visitors to the physical site to engage with 'the real'. The claims of authenticity promulgated by museums in general face a dilemma. Such claims are automatically undermined by stealth as the museum goes about integrating facets of the shopping centre experience into their online shops.

There is no interest in claiming that museums are simply passive entities either through physical display of objects or by blind acceptance of marketing and display techniques offered by shopping centres. Whilst museums have a diversity of possible interactions, both passive and active, as part

of their relationship with the individual consumer, individual institutional practices are not the focus of this paper. Rather, the debate between shopping and museums has been used to contextualise the network of relations and the level of interactivity that can impact on the type of project, event or activity undertaken within the university/museum sector.

The possibility of interactive play to enable the active voice of a consumer resonates in the case studies, described later in the paper, which are drawn from a tertiary context. Through examination of these case studies, the paper proposes a new model of engagement for university art/design education, which allows participants (in this case students) to actively engage within the cultural field. Active participation in the construction of new relations through physical and virtual interactions, provides opportunities to critique existing relations and to become familiar with the purported transparency of the shopping experience and the apparent opacity that is typically associated with the museum's efforts to preserve the past (Montague, 2006).

The authors identify a parallel between the opportunities for action that exist within the museum/shopping centre experience and the university context. The remainder of the paper will use two tertiary-based case studies to critically dissect the potential for participants to make positive interventions into the cultural field. The case studies that follow represent deliberate choices made by the project organisers, to transform the way individuals engage with artifacts from a relatively passive to a more active exchange, to give audience(s) voice, and to privilege that voice within the museum sector.

The network of relations between the shopping centre experience and that of the museum are perpetually unstable and in a state of flux (Bourdieu, 1993). The paper has a post-structural interest in the social dimensions of human activity, whereby a single event can be active and passive simultaneously. What is of interest here is the possibility of re-imagining possible sites of interaction for the audience between the glitz of 'pure' shopping and the hybrid physical and virtual museum.

To exemplify the possibility of new post-structural spaces in contemporary practice, the remainder of the paper is organised in the following way. The first case study develops a discussion about the dialogues between secondary and tertiary institutions and agencies, using the UNSW/COFA seminar titled *Critical Junctures: ARTEXPRESS in the Public Domain* (2006). The second case study investigates exhibitions & contemporary art/design practice via an Online Education Kit for the recent exhibition *Terra Alterius* (2004). The paper closes with a discussion of the significance of these two innovative case studies for the public broadly defined.

Case Study One: Dialogues between secondary and tertiary institutions, and other agencies

The Twelfth Occasional Seminar in Art, Design and Education: *Critical Junctures: ARTEXPRESS in the Public Domain* (2006), was the first seminar held at UNSW/COFA to encourage critical discussion around the role of a high-profile secondary student exhibition (SSE), in relation to

contemporary art practice and art/design education. The seminar was held in conjunction with the show. This annual SSE is widely considered as pivotal: a point of culmination within the visual arts education calendar for students, teachers and schools who hope to have works selected for this prestigious and competitive exhibition. The acclaim this show enjoys is directly linked to its display at the AGNSW and satellite venues including UNSW/COFA and the retail venue, David Jones. Of interest here is that the exhibition occupies a somewhat bifurcated existence: first, as the endpoint of a State examination system; and second, as an art/retail event. The event influences and is influenced by the web of connections it shares with schools, the tertiary sector and various cultural and commercial institutions.

The seminar organisers attempted to encourage open dialogue encompassing a range of perspectives and to make public those undisclosed connections, structural constraints and opportunities symptomatic of the cultural field at work between agencies and individuals. Leading practitioners from the art world and from secondary and tertiary sectors were invited to discuss their experiences and insights about the show. Presenters included a director of a university art/design school, a freelance curator/critic, a secondary visual arts teacher, the exhibition coordinator, an academic in social/cultural analysis, a representative from an art educational professional association, and a contemporary artist. The seminar actively engaged new communities of association specifically by drawing into critical dialogues: artists; theoreticians; staff and students from the tertiary and secondary sector; and representatives from museum and government. In addition, the national representation (SA, Qld, Vic) of speakers and participants meant that the seminar moved the conversation beyond the local situation to address broader concerns in contemporary art practice while also improving collaborations with other key partners.

For the purposes of this paper, the views of the curator/critic and the secondary visual arts teacher are used because they exemplify particularly well the key conceptual ideas driving the seminar's organization.

The SSE within the sphere of the art museum: Curator/critic's perspective

The curator/critic presented a critical assessment of the SSE based on her professional perspective of the staging of that event. Her views about the SSE are of significance to the findings of this paper because they make visible the dilemma of whether young people can be regarded as artists simply by their inclusion in a public exhibition. Because of the contentiousness of such propositions they are rarely articulated in a public forum.

The curator/critic questioned why Year 12 visual arts students with as-yet unrealised artistic talent should be given the opportunity to exhibit when there are so few opportunities for emerging talented artists to exhibit within a highly competitive art scene. For this curator/critic, the exhibition seems to devalue professional art practice as it promotes the idea that everyone can be an artist by privileging secondary student art in a museum and art world context. The seminar provided an

opportunity for the curator/critic to speak about the slippage between artworks presented as a secondary student examination that then evolves into a museum/gallery display. Her comments reveal that this process is complex and shifting, highlighting structural mechanisms rather than content as indicators of meaning in the public domain.

In selecting shows of emerging artists, the curator/critic explained she typically looks for content, technique, and a sense of an individual voice. She rarely finds these attributes in the SSE. The works, she claims are often over-directed, unsubtle, slick and derivative. The curator/critic registered her uncertainty about the appropriateness of full art world exposure of student works, and noted that there were no comparable public display of essays written by top English students, for example, such as publication in newspapers.

Intersections between SSE, the art world and the teaching of visual arts in the secondary school setting: Secondary visual arts teacher perspective

In the interests of generating open discussion about this student exhibition, and yet mindful of possible self-censorship, the seminar organisers invited the perspective of a senior visual arts teacher from a private secondary school. While the teacher acknowledged the positive aspects of this highly public spectacle, he registered his acute awareness of the inadequacy of such an event in acknowledging the efforts of all students and teachers who are engaged in the production of senior school certificate artworks.

These comments again highlight the various guises the students' artworks simultaneously assume in the different contexts in which they are situated, moving out of the secondary school setting for assessment purposes, then - if selected for the exhibition - inserted into a range of other art world agencies (art, tertiary, retail). The secondary teacher's comments reveal his interest in how these agencies make use of the product, and how such public exhibitions in turn influence subsequent production of the next generation of artworks. The teacher emphasised the educational value of display within the school setting. He also highlighted the disjunction between the highly public display of student artworks in the sphere of the museum and shopping centres (David Jones) and undisclosed mechanisms of authority that seamlessly organise such events. The teacher concluded by drawing attention to the repetitive cycle of influence and influencing that is embedded within the endless production and consumption of the exhibition of student work.

Case Study Two: Exhibitions and contemporary art/design practice

The production by tertiary students of the Online Education Kit for *Terra Alterius: Land of Another*, (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 20 August – 25 September 2004), represented a novel educational strategy for enhancing the learning and development of various audiences. Following its Sydney showing, the exhibition toured extensively through NSW, Victoria and the ACT. As with the focus of

this paper, *Terra Alterius* sought to re-imagine possible sites of interaction for artists and audiences. Margaret Farmer, the exhibition's curator, writes, 'Imagine an Australia that was recognised as *terra alterius*, land of another, rather than treated as *terra nullius*, land of no-one' (catalogue cover). Farmer invited artists to respond directly to this alternate view of Australia as a re-imagined history and set of ideas, specifically to actively create another view of Australia - an alternative history - to explore the political and cultural terrain of a reconciled Australia.

The curator anticipated and actively sought an educational component with an Online Education Kit and actively sought expertise of UNSW/COFA art and design students. The subject matter and future orientation of the contemporary works commissioned and constructed for the show have significant import for audience development. Farmer discusses the development of these new narratives and their potential to engage with new communities, noting, 'This imaginary Australia, *Terra Alterius*, with a different history, civilisation and art, is fertile ground for answers to the question: what might a reconciled Australia be like?' (Farmer, 2004, pages unnumbered).

The exhibition identifies a space between the artist and the artworks they have produced, in the process it deconstructs notions of colonisation and anticipating a revised hope for a reconciled Australia. Into this in-between space steps the educative possibilities of an Online Education Kit engaged with a range of communities both through physical visits to regional galleries and via the virtual portal of the web. Disregarding the tradition of simply celebrating each individual artist's biography, the Online Education Kit adopted a novel approach. This was achieved by UNSW/COFA art and design students working alongside museum professionals to devise learning activities that developed emergent themes critical to the show and suitable for diverse audiences: Indigenous/non-Indigenous; urban/rural; school children/adults; and new/experienced audiences. Content was derived from artists' profiles, and critical and historical quotes as well as student interviews with artists. Together these resources culminated in the construction of new narratives to accompany the show by actively engaging students in art world practices.

The uniqueness of this initiative is in the engagement of students from university art and design setting, acting as paraprofessionals in consultation with curators, gallery staff and contemporary artists. In addition, staff with expertise in online educational environments as well as the secondary NSW syllabus requirements, also make the mix of relationships and connections particularly relevant. The educational relevance of this exercise for the students bears directly on their professional participation in a real world exhibition-based project versus the more typical hypothetical offerings of a tertiary institution. The collaborative writing process produced new educational narratives to accompany the artists' biographical statements, regularly provided for many gallery shows. New audiences were also imagined beyond the gallery's white cube. For instance, the online kit allowed potential visitors to the various venues to prepare for the physical visit in advance. It was also envisioned that the online kit would be used by local communities, both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous, to help situate and develop local knowledge of themes in the show.

The significance of exhibitions for the public

The focus of this paper has been the re-imagining of interactive processes and communication technologies between educational institutions and society. It conceptualises access to different communities by examining the interplays of activity possible in two case studies.

In the instance of Case Study One the nature of teaching and learning was not simply driven by orthodox engagements with the student exhibition. Moving beyond hagiographic accounts of the creative process and the reception of the show, the seminar instead disclosed unique insights into the structural mechanisms involved in the construction of a student exhibition. The significance of the Occasional Seminar for this paper is in its capacity to collaborate with key partners (secondary and tertiary stakeholders, art world and educational agents) to make clear and to re-imagine some of the networks of relationships, transformations and critical intersections that constitute this SSE. In addition, the seminar made public the transformation of the student and the artwork that occur once the works enter the public domain. The student becomes an artist and the artwork, which was formerly an assessment item, becomes a work of art, an object viewed within the gallery's white cube. The seminar offered the opportunity to critique and challenge what these transformations mean within and beyond the art world. As a consequence, the seminar provided a rich set of opportunities to enhance the learning and development of artists and educators in seemingly well-known terrain.

With Case Study Two (*Terra Alterius*), students from a tertiary art and design school worked with professionals from the art museum and educational spheres to appropriate and apply new meanings to the activities possible within the sphere of the art museum. The acquisition of communication skills required to develop the Online Education Kit meant that the students could intervene in a range of different communities beyond the scope offered by a more orthodox course. These new possibilities gave students an active voice in the production of meanings engendered by the exhibition. Also, in *Terra Alterius* the learning for university students occurred in the actual production of the kit as a communication tool. In other words, the learning was not necessarily content-driven, a key recommendation of the UNESCO report 'Moving Forward on Arts and Education' (2006). Further, the new collaborations and access to new communities made possible via the *Terra Alterius* Online Education Kit present a model of ongoing, evolving and open-ended outcomes.

These case studies conceptualise exhibition practice as a complex web of mutually dependent communities not typically evident or given voice in the orthodox staging of an exhibition and accompanying catalogue. In doing so, they provided generative systems capable of challenging the authority of the museum, through disclosing how social and cultural networks operate. Each of these case studies achieved a range of outcomes. These included a publication in the case of the seminar and an online catalogue in the instance of the exhibition. As such, both offer a sustainable life as accessible professional resources taken up by a range of expanded audiences in the public

domain. On a more innovative front, both case studies functioned as powerful educational resources providing unique opportunities for tertiary students to gain a heightened awareness of some key mechanisms at play in the sphere of the museum, which are often rendered invisible by professional practice. Anecdotally, the experience has produced continuing benefits for students bringing them to a new level of understanding about how the art world actually operates, and gaining confidence to engage critically within this domain. As such these case studies represents a key outcome for an exhibition space located within a university setting.

To revisit the shopping metaphor, these case studies move beyond the passive experience of the shopping mall experience, where consumers operate under the guise of active interaction with 'the real' and the illusory promise of authentic choice. The museum offers more than this economy of exchange by presenting its audiences with the opportunity to engage with 'the real': physical or virtual or intertwined. As this paper argues, a more productive space for audience engagement can be constructed. By providing access to a network of critical interactions beyond the systemic mechanisms of contemporary art and exhibition practice, universities are well-placed to create powerful learning experiences 'in-between' the museum and its publics.

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