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ABSTRACT:
Shaping Relevance: Twenty-first century (art) museum philosophy and some practices.

For a number of years I have taught an introductory course on curatorship to tertiary visual arts students completing their undergraduate degrees at a Brisbane based university in Australia. Every year, and as part of my introductory lecture, I pose two questions to the assembled student body. The first question is: How can the (art) museum meaningfully contribute to this new century? The second question - what philosophies must this institution embrace or acknowledge in its quest for ongoing relevance, is a logical extension of the first. Visual artists in training, like established artists in the field, need to answer these and similar questions about the public (art) museum, in order to understand the symbiotic relationship this cultural institution has with the various publics it serves.

In the last 10 years numerous theoreticians have asked similar questions. Three writers in particular – David Carr in his article entitled "The Need for the Museum", in Museum News (March/April 1999); Michael Kimmelman writing an article entitled, "Museums in a Quandary: Where are the Ideals?" for the New York Times in 2001 and Timothy Luke’s 2002 publication Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition, have all presented particular perspectives worthy of further debate. This paper, in acknowledging the scholarship of these and others writers, will consider some the underlying philosophies and missions contemporary art museums must employing and acknowledge to be relevant.
Shaping Relevance: Twenty-first century (art) museum philosophy and some practices.

We have never left the Crystal Palace. Having achieved its institutional apotheosis in the Crystal Palace, the museum's history came to an end. What then does it mean, today, to deny that this history is over by continuing to generate futures that can only ever be reiterations and replications of the same?

This statement by Donald Preziosi is located at the conclusion of a chapter entitled 'Philosophy and the Ends of the Museum' in the 2006 publication Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century edited by Hugh Genoways. To contextualise and further consider this provocative statement it is important to look at the beginning of the same chapter where Preziosi writes:

We inhabit a world where virtually anything can be contained in the museum, and where virtually anything can convincingly (or not) serve as a museum... The question that requires our attention is the most basic one, effectively obscured by the discourses in and about the museum. What kind of world is [it]? (Preziosi in Genoways 2006: 69)

The author follows this statement by posing four additional questions: What kind of world is prescribed, defined, and proscribed by the museum? How has [the museum] come about, whom does it service, and whom does it do a disservice? Can it possibly have a future, which is dissimilar from a present, which is inescapably an allomorph or predictable fractal version of all its pasts? (Genoways 2006:69)

In this brief paper I will suggest, but not fully explore possible answers. Those I present are evidential and only partly formed. Other considered debates and discussions need to occur before museum futures are clearly apparent. In the meantime, by shaping relevance through a brief exploration of what I believe to be some key texts produced over the last decade, as well as providing examples of exhibitions that show the hallmarks of change, some aspects of a twenty-first museum philosophy and practices may emerge.
Preziosi continues in the same publication to state that over the last three decades museum literature has not evidenced or projected museum futures or philosophies, different from those of the past. Museum professionals he says “have abandoned any critical engagement with the fundamental questions about the functions, social and political roles of museums” (Genoways 2006:70).

While the 1999 international conference entitled The Future of the Art Museum held over a decade ago at what is now Tate Britain, attempted to consider this vexed question, Preziosi believes it was high-jacker by the notion of technological excellence in delivering cultural content. “Museums have instead learned to present more effectively than ever (just) a facade of change,” concludes Preziosi (2006: 71).

Throughout the last decade facadism has been rife in the public museum industry. New museum architecture such as Frank Gehry’s Weisman Museum in Minneapolis, his Bilbao Guggenheim, Libeskind’s Denver Art Museum or every the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Brisbane Australia still support (mostly) white cubed interiors, “the same old modes of display and the same old consumerist fetishizations of celebrity artists and historical personalities”. (Preziosi 2006: 71)

With a focus on 2008, a number of well-respected Australian public museums also employed outmoded systems of display in their exhibitions. Degas Master of French Art – the exhibition on show at the National Gallery of Australia from December engaged in the cult of historical personality. Andreas Gursky mounted in November by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne championed the fetishisation of this celebrity artist, while Contemporary Australia: Optimism curated by the Queensland Art Gallery /Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Brisbane was an exercise in part in the commodification of art history dressed up as contemporary. Optimism is the first exhibition in a triennial series of thematic contemporary Australian art exhibitions to be shown in Brisbane over the coming years.

In 2008, the National Gallery of Australia located in Canberra, the nation’s capital also curated the exhibition - Gods, Ghosts and Men – Pacific Arts, while
the National Gallery of Victoria mounted *Across the Desert: Aboriginal batik from Central Australia*. Both exhibitions exemplify, a positive and somewhat new direction for public art museums programming in Australia. Over the last two decades, albeit still displaying their exhibitions within white cubes, these museums and others have moved into the vexed arena of curating and interpreting Indigenous cultural practices. Australian Indigenous cultural practices and that of other native peoples across the Asia Pacific region, in fact a wide variety of non-white cultures, have finally found their negotiated place in Australian public museums. While museums are driven by a theory into practice raison d’etre, the artifice and fiction that is the museum is quite often at odds with the lived protocols of the Indigenous people’s whose work is on display.

From 1991, the Queensland Art Gallery’s *Asia Pacific Triennial (APT)* exhibition has stimulated interest about cultural difference in the local museum going audience, as well as continuing cultural dialogues in the Asia Pacific region. The state Government of Queensland understood from the early 1990s, that the visual arts could act as a cultural emissary, affording future opportunities to strengthen trade and commerce between Queensland and various Asian and Pacific countries.

The virtual world of the art museum, as represented by the National Gallery of Australia’s (NGA) website is also a zone where cultural difference, understood here as the visual arts of Aboriginal Australia is considered. In 2007 this gallery mounted the first in what will be a series of exhibitions titled - *Culture Warriors: National Indigenous Art Triennial*. Brenda Croft the Gallery’s Senior Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander introduces the inaugural exhibition on the website by stating that:

> through their art and culture, the artists in Culture Warriors ... tell the stories of their communities in an incredible diversity of ‘voices’ – humble, venerated, spiritual, customary, poignant, satirical, political, innovative and overt*. (NGA website)

Here the authorial voice of the once subjugated and ‘other’ are given a platform on which to speak. To display culturally specific objects by Indigenous and other
native peoples, any public museum must acknowledge the protocols that inform the life and customs of these various peoples. This knowledge has shifted, in some cases, the museum’s modes of display. This shift has also had a democratising effect on particular museums and their visitors, as evidenced by the audiences who attended the Queensland Art Gallery’s/Gallery of Modern Art’s Asian Pacific Triennial exhibitions from their inception in the early 1990s. Over the period 1993 to 1999 and beyond, museum visitor numbers to three Asia Pacific Triennial exhibitions increased substantially. While there would be many factors contributing to the increase in numbers, in museological terms, the **mindfulness** of the then gallery director and his board of Trustees afforded new possibility for that public gallery. The dynamic that is the choreographed spaces - the museum’s galleries, together with an inventive program of installation and performance as part of the Asia Pacific Triennial, shifted the ever enquiring mind of already engaged museum goers to see the object lessons inherent in the "unsaid and unseen" (Genoways 2006:75) of the Asian Pacific Triennial. "The epistemological technology for producing knowledge and fabricating worlds" (Genoways 2006:75) that is the public art gallery, gave these audiences some new ways of knowing non-white societies and their cultural practices.

The Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) has and will continue to engage a number of guest artists, from various countries throughout the Asia Pacific in constructing site-specific installations. Over the last decade and a half, APT artists have constructed such diverse installations as large size bamboo bridges, small-mirrored rooms, places and spaces to write, contemplate and perform. Performances have often interrogated the fragility of human existence and suffering. It is quite possible that these forms of museum–theatre event alone may have forever changed the way local museum audiences understand, having become by association critical thinkers, the power of the museum, its’ potential to be relevant and alive to the now.

While *Cai Gou Qiang’s* (bamboo) *Bridge Crossing Project* in the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial (1999) was overtly and symbolically bridging the divide between Asian and Pacific peoples, and in this case Australia standing in for the
West; APT visitors traversing the bamboo bridge (in a spirit of play) were all sprayed with a fine mist of water. This engagement with interactive play, evidenced on the gallery floor may have also translated the Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art position from a cultural institution engaged with the public trust and good public service management of an art collection and the buildings it houses, to a position of trust within the local community, and a reputation of innovation with the museum fraternity. The invention of *Kids APT* - an innovative and educational component of the Asia Pacific Triennial has also afforded the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art market share of potential or future audiences for this 21st century public art museum.

Revisiting Preziosi’s four questions let me tease out other thoughts, possible futures and relevance of the contemporary public art museums. In the last 10 years numerous theoreticians have asked similar questions to those posed by Preziosi. Three writers in particular – David Carr, Michael Kimmelman and Timothy Luke have problematised the twenty-first century (art) museum.

David Carr’s 1999 article in *Museum News* entitled “The Need for the Museum”, considers museums as institutions for the ‘mindful’ life. The psychologist Ellen J. Langer has described *mindfulness* as a state of engagement with the environment and its constant flow of information, a flow that expands the capacity of the receiver while diminishing the effects of entropy. Carr suggests in his 2006 publication: *A Place Not a Place: Reflections and Possibilities in Museums and Libraries*, “that museums as institutions rife with schema, constructs, taxonomies and perspectives – serve *mindfulness* by holding the changing world constant and offering a form or structure for it, so the mind can grasp, reflect and move forward within a design (think the entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art)*”. (Genoways 2006:10)

Carr also believes that museums: create problems for which the only solution is critical thinking. As certainly as they are real and tactile environments, cultural institutions such as museums are also reflective spaces, intentionally symbolic, encoded and intellectual. To find one’s way one must think, a solitary
activity. Museums present every visitor with the problem of acting with purpose in order to construct meaning" (Carr in Genoways 2006:11).

Critical thinking in institutions such as museums involves the presence of an accessible array of objects and information, typically systematised in thematic or physical order. The visitor is involved in exploratory processes, different kinds of knowledge involving language, observing and documenting information. Hopefully my Asia Pacific Triennial example reinforced this point. The museum is an exemplary instrument of ‘mindfulness’ and critical thinking because it encompasses a board range of alternative visions, experiences and information. It is a setting for dialogues and transactions, verifications of evidence, the drawing of inferences and diagnoses, expressions of enquiry, speculations about authenticity and as Maxine Greene states " intergenerational continuity" (2006:11).

Where as in 1997 James Clifford introduced in an essay the concept of contact zones to portray museums and heritage sites as lively, contentious intersections, opening them up to contestation and collaborative activity. "This notion neatly captured and reiterated an emphasis on the museum as a forum that emerged in museum practice and scholarship from the mid 1980s" (Karp et al 2006: 2). The Australia based triennials - Culture Warriors: National Indigenous Art and the Asia Pacific are examples of contact zones, theatres where difference is played out. Very differently from the nineteenth-century freak-shows, where race, and/or cultural difference were exploited instead of being celebrated.

In Art as a Mode of Knowing Jerome Bruner speaks of "the self-rewarding experience of connection"(1997: 59). Here the art museum affords the critical thinking visitor to engage in intellectual leaps, where mindful risks are taken and where personal vision is illuminated. As Maxine Greene also states "There is no such thing as a second hand experience with a Cezanne landscape or a Woody Allen film. We have to be there to bring them to life" (2006:14). Here the notion of authenticity and auration support the museum’s ongoing claim as a site that engages the unique.
In 2001, the critic Michael Kimmelman writing an article in the New York Times entitled “Museums in a Quandary: Where are the Ideals?” (August 26, 2001) began his article by referring to the (then) recently completed Salzburg Seminar and the seminar’s topic *Museums in the 21st century*. He went on to state: Museums have never been more important.

They have become cathedrals for a secular culture, storehouses of collective values and diverse histories, places where increasingly we seem to want to spend our free time and thrash out big issues (the religious debate over "Sensation" in Brooklyn, the atomic bomb argument at the Smithsonian, multiculturalism, taxes and public morality). We put our faith in few traditional institutions these days, but the museum is still one of them. Its purview extends beyond objects to ideas...” (2001)

Museums were conceived in the 19th century as places to improve public taste, to educate the middle classes. Self-improvement and commerce went hand in hand in the early history of museums, especially in the United States and Britain. According to the liberal Victorian social ideal of the period, museums cultivated good citizens who would then share in the general prosperity of a properly functioning democracy. Enlightened citizens became acquisitive participants in a flush economy. Museums served the public good, in other words, they were good for society and, in the process, good for business. But they were never places of consensus, continues Kimmelman in his article.

When people talk today about democratised museums, he writes, they don't just mean more popular shows and more access to the collections. They mean that museums are expected to practice collective bargaining over civic priorities. Kimmelman sites the *Sensation* exhibition as a case in point. He believes the Brooklyn Museum needed to engage in a public relations exercise with the Catholic Church before the exhibition opened, possibly minimising the fallout that occurred. (New York Times August 26 2001).
But democratisation is what the political left long argued for at museums: down with elitism, question authority. Cultural theorists like Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, starting in the 1960's, supported this argument, casting doubts on the benevolence of a range of institutions previously viewed as benign and progressive: hospitals, universities and libraries as well as museums. These institutions came to be viewed as disciplinary enforcers in class and race wars.

Is it any wonder that museums therefore came to view architecture as a solution to their problems? Architects naturally wanted to build the new cathedrals, but museums wanted architects too, partly because just about the only aspect of the museum over which institutional authority had not yet totally eroded was the outside of the building. The popularity of Tate Modern when it opened proved that the impact of spectacular architecture would pretty much drown out even the most substantial complaints about exhibitions and collections.

This new populism has increased the mythology of attendance. How do museums prove their worthiness to corporate and government sponsors today? By drawing more people through the turnstiles, and more kinds of people. *Monet, Van Gogh or Degas* exhibitions guarantee big box office return for museums, so they declare themselves successful – the tautology is absurd. The question should be, not how many people visit museums or particular exhibitions, but how these visitors value their visits. Museums have to continue to measure the quality of the experience they offer. I refer to the Asia pacific Triennial I mentioned earlier in this paper. The Salzburg seminar was revealing in that the management and finance tutorials were packed, while the sessions on ethics had to be cancelled.

Timothy Luke writing in the 2002 publication *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, unequivocally states:

Even though electronic media are acquiring tremendous clout - Mp3 players, blackberries, ipods and phones abound, museums are still critically important educational institutions. Today museums are
venues where many key cultural realities are first defined and in this process the personal becomes political. (Luke 2002:xiv)

What we are dealing with here is symbolic politics, and symbols are quite powerful. The continuous struggle during the 1990s and into the early years of this century articulated as the culture wars, is best exemplified in Australia by the Howard government's (1996-2007) intervention into how the Museum of Australia could, through exhibition, define a country and its people. While the museum and its (then) director – Dawn Casey, an Indigenous woman were accused of perpetuating a so called 'black armband approach' to history, the same accusatory finger of government was part of the hand of government's policy driven refusal not to say sorry to Indigenous Australians for the wrongs of many previous federal and state government policies. Here the personal became political.

In his publication Luke contents that museums are "polemical fortifications that mean to hold, through the artful process of words pictures, sounds and objects the hearts and minds of visitors" (2002: xviii). He reiterates, "We must focus museums as sites of finely structured normative argument and artfully staged cultural normalisation. (xxiv) In general museum exhibitions have a profound effect on the body politic.

As recently as 2007 Daniel Siedell speaking at the symposium: The Future of Art Museum: Curatorial and Educational Perspectives at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden in the United States posited:

There are few futures pondered more often than the art museum's. The new millennium has spawned a veritable cottage industry of such prognostication. Most of it has occurred from the perspectives of building expansion, audience growth, and collection development. These are not, by any means, unimportant considerations. However, such sustained attention to them by directors, marketers, board members, collectors, and the mass media tend to obscure the fact that these areas of concern are not ends in themselves. A new museum wing, higher attendance, and more gifts of art to the collection mean little unless they
serve to facilitate specific curatorial and educational ends, which themselves are in the service of expanding and deepening their capacity to enhance the experience of art. (4)

While the scope of this a paper does not afford comprehensive answers to questions posed by Preziosi, and extended on through Carr’s, Kimmelman’s and Luke’s particular enquiries, I concur with David Siedell, that informed mindful curatorship may provide some understandings of what is or continues to be possible within the art museum. Again the example of Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art’s Asia Pacific Triennials is evidence. Critical thinking curatorship can indeed reshaped the art museums relevance.

To complete this paper I present two examples of recent exhibitions mounted as part the 2008 Melbourne Festival in Victoria Australia which ran from October 9 -25. The first exhibition was entitled Intimacy. It was curated by Anna MacDonald for the Australian Centre Contemporary Art, commonly known to Melburnians as ACCA. Intimacy is a meditation on the intricacies of human bonds. Featuring artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Steve McQueen and Jesper Just, this exhibition explored experiences of passion, companionship, love and longing, as well as disquiet, loneliness and abandonment that can define intimate relationships. A particular work in the exhibition - a super 16 mm film entitled No Man is an Island 2004 produced by the Danish contemporary artist Jesper Just, furthered the curatorial themes by exploring the complexity of gender and age in contemporary society. Here the artist is interested in the representation of masculinity and male stereotypes as delivered in mainstream film and television. Intimacy as an exhibition employs new and old technologies to shape human stories.

Every visitor viewing the Just film must have employed mindfulness and critical thinking, traversing the veritable mind-field of human emotions, empathetically shaped through and by McDonald’s curatorship. Intimacy as an exhibition, located within the physicality that is ACCA became a complicit part of the gallery as a contact zone, a place were contestation and collaboration dwell. Intimacy in its exhibitionary totality, and Just’s ﬁlmic contribution evidenced key
social and cultural realities defined here as personal, but have in various ways become political. Here, in this space and time collective bargaining was the right to show human emotions, to put them on display and to allow various critical thinkers, publics that visited both the Melbourne Festival and the contemporary art space to reflect on our humanity.

Ecstatic City 2008 by American artist Chris Doyle was also an exhibition event at the Melbourne Festival of that year. This work - part contemporary architecture and part projection, was located and designed as a 'miniplex marina' and situated in the moat of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) on St Kilda Road Melbourne. Chris Doyle enlisted Melburnians of all ages to become, through projected images of themselves, contributors to an ecstatic, vibrant ever-changing city. Animations made for and featuring Melburnians were projected in epic scale along the exterior walls of the miniplexes and the NGV's façade. In this site-specific temporary public artwork, authenticity and auration focussed on the uniqueness and individuality of photographed citizens of Melbourne, projected and displayed symbolically of the gallery's walls. This exhibit became a contact zone, a place were the collaborative nature of the project, exemplifies democracy and difference, while providing entertainment and reinforcing community pride. Ecstatic City 2008 acknowledged citizenship, participation and difference as curatorial rationale.

To conclude, and in light of the exhibitions - Intimacy and Ecstatic City 2008 and the Triennials curated in Brisbane and Canberra based public galleries, let me re-state Donald Preziosi's four (4) question and pose some statements by Carr as possible answers with regard to the future of the public art museum. Preziosi's first question was - what kind of world is [it]? If Carr was to provide an answer it may be as follows:

the world as it happens and as it is experienced is fluid: the world as it is known in evidence and description is captive. As museum visitors we learn through our systematic gathering and observing of evidence. A learner's or museum visitor's task and that of the museum are identical: to
open the world that flows beyond the museum's capacity. (Carr in Genoways 2006: 11).

The second question posed by Preziosi was - what kind of world is prescribed, defined, and proscribed by the museum? If Carr was to answer this question be may explain - "because the living, fluid world can be known only in an unfinished and open state – a state of potential and promise and improvisation – our knowledge of the world in museums is incomplete and unfinished." (Carr in Genoways 2006: 11)

Preziosi third question was - how has [the museum] come about, whom does it service, and whom does it do a disservice? Carr would probably answer by exclaiming, "a museum is not about what it contains, [not who it services] but more what it makes possible". (Carr in Genoways 2006: 16)

The fourth question posed by Preziosi challenges us when he asks - can [the museum] possibly have a future, which is dissimilar from a present, which is inescapably, an allomorph or predictable fractal version of all its pasts? Maybe Carr would have answered with passion and conviction stating: "we make a museum work when we stand in it, as hopeful people talking together in a small place and time". (Carr in Genoways 2006: 17)

Finally let me return to Preziosi fundamental premise and question. I reiterate, can the (art) museum meaningfully contribute to this new century? Informed by the illustinated points or view – arguments put forward by all the authors referenced in this paper, and the personal experience I have has as a guest curator in a number of public art museums in Australia, my answer is yes with qualifications.

The New Museology articulated by Peter Vergo over two decades ago acknowledged the need for museum professionals to move the focus of their enterprise from the objects (collections) in their care to the museum visitor experience. If art museums employ critical thinking as a hallmark of sound curatorship, than its' just possible, and I have provided examples earlier in this paper to illustrate this point, that museum visitors may also become critical
thinkers and thus ensure through this symbiotic relationship the relevance and future of the museum in the 21st century.

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