

The Museum as a Social Enterprise: The National Gallery of Australia

Anne McDonald

National Gallery of Australia

I am very conscious of being from the “lucky country”; a term coined by Australian writer, academic, and arts administrator Donald Horne in his 1964 book of the same name. However, such a term does not mean that our peaceful and democratic society is not without its areas of conflict. While my case study shows what can be done when finance and resources are available, I hope it also shows that public institutions can make a difference, can take a stance, and can through careful research and display awaken people’s consciousness, even when governments may not be prepared to do so. Some of the issues relating to access, exhibitions and programmes might, I hope, offer ideas that can be adopted elsewhere.

Australia is geographically located in the Asia region and prides itself on being one of the most democratic, multi-cultural societies in the world, with more than 150 different nationalities represented in its community.

It has an Indigenous population, which has suffered appallingly since the beginning of European settlement in 1788; and which has only in recent years, through such forums as the ongoing native title debate, the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, and the *Sea of Hands* public movement, been able to gain any significant recognition. A reconciliation process is fortunately now in place, and a National Sorry Day has occurred. The arts have become an important medium through which the Indigenous voice is being heard and I will address some examples of how the National Gallery of Australia has provided a forum for expression of that voice.

In October 1998, the National Gallery’s Corporate Plan 1999-2001 was launched. In the introduction the recently appointed Director, Dr Brian Kennedy, stated that the Gallery is a “social enterprise... [that] aims to confer social benefits on the community”. Our core business he said “is to serve the widest possible audience by providing access to the collection of works of art and information about them”. Our ‘Vision for the New Millennium’ is to “be the premier public gallery in the country...”.¹ A fairly tall order one might say!

As a social enterprise, aiming to serve the widest possible audience – local, national and international – the challenges are before us. How can the NGA seek to be all things to all people? Or can it? And if so, how best do we go about doing our business?

The National Gallery of Australia first opened its doors in 1982, on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra, Australia's national capital. Like Washington, Canberra is a planned city and is situated in eastern Australia approximately mid-way between our two largest cities, Melbourne and Sydney. In 1998 the staff numbered around 200. The gallery's floor area is approximately 20,573 square metres with approximately 7,000 square metres devoted to exhibition space.

Access Hurdle No. 1: Facade and Impression

The building is a concrete temple-like structure of the Brutalist school of architecture. And herein lies access hurdle number one. If an institution is to be perceived as a social enterprise by all sections of its community, its physical presence must be one that welcomes and encourages participation. While being a magnificent building, it is unfortunately not one that immediately welcomes visitors. Physical access is a critical issue. The NGA entrance is four floors above ground level and is reached by a ramp of stairs. There is a portico of huge cement pillars at the entrance, which creates a temple-like effect. Most people access the building via the long and imposing (and in wet conditions sometimes rather slippery) ramp. Maintaining the integrity of the building while providing a user-friendly street level access has now become a priority.

Access Hurdle No. 2: Entrance fees

Financial constraints can also deny accessibility to sections of a community. In October last year therefore, an announcement was made that the Gallery entrance fee was to be abolished. The decision was lauded in the local press as a positive move, and I quote from The Canberra Times Editorial of 26 October 1998: "The removal of the entry fee is a good symbolic move, bringing the National Gallery into line with state galleries and letting Australians know that the art within belongs to the nation."²

Entrance fees are still applicable for major exhibitions, which takes into account the enormous costs involved in mounting such exhibitions. However, significant discounts are available for school groups, gallery members, and special visitors.

Access Hurdle No. 3: The physical layout

What messages does an institution project through its physical layout? And, if works of art can be "springboards for a range of associations which are...dependent upon the beholder's personal history"³, how will visitors from a range of social and cultural backgrounds see themselves within this context?

With the opening of its temporary exhibition wing, which has changed the internal orientation of the Gallery, the opportunity arose to re-assess the physical layout of the permanent collection.

The collection is divided into four major areas, displayed on the Gallery's three levels. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and International Art are on the entrance level, Australian Art on the upper level and Asian Art on the lower level.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, works that are uniquely Australian, welcome visitors in Gallery One of the entrance level. They are displayed in a beautiful and imposing high-ceilinged space, which up until last year included the *Aboriginal Memorial*, a major installation by 43 artists from Central Arnhem Land, in Northern Australia.

Commissioned for the bicentennial of European settlement in Australia in 1988, the *Aboriginal Memorial* consists of "200 hollow log coffins, one for each year of European settlement; it represents a forest of souls, a war cemetery and the final rites for all Aboriginal people who have been denied a proper burial."⁴ The *Memorial* was first installed in the International Sculpture Court on the lower level of the Gallery, where it remained until 1991 when it was moved to Gallery One on the entrance level. While a compromise was reached in not siting it in its own space, as the artists had wanted, but amongst other Aboriginal Art works, its prominent position, visible from the foyer, ensured that the first impression (as with the reality of Australia's history) would be of Aboriginal presence.

With the opening of the new temporary exhibition galleries last year, the decision was made to move the *Memorial* again.⁵ I should mention that the artists did not limit the Gallery's options to display the work in a variety of contexts, but the *Memorial* does now stand in its own space, finally realising their wishes. Also, had it remained in Gallery One, many thousands of visitors, who come principally to view temporary exhibitions, would have missed it. I agree with Wally Caruana (Curator of Aboriginal Art) that "In its new location the *Memorial* is hard to miss, no matter which path through the Gallery a visitor takes. It has now become the heart of the building at the junction between Western art, the new exhibition galleries and the Australian galleries upstairs."⁶ It is also now in a location which can be equated to the placing of a memorial at a central location in a town or city.⁷

When the *Memorial* was moved in 1991, Professor Virginia Spate remarked: "The new location forces reinterpretation...of every other work of art in the building. Once we've passed through this forest of coffins, once we've absorbed ourselves in them, consciousness of their multiple meanings cannot be emptied from our minds as we look at other works."⁸ Her comments remain relevant today.

Many visitors come to the NGA specifically to see the non-Indigenous Australian collection. For expediency therefore, should it have been displayed on the entrance level and International Art be moved upstairs? With Wally Caruana and Virginia Spate's words in mind, I would argue that it is the role of the Gallery to display its collection in a way that will impact on the visitor's consciousness. I am pleased to say that Australian

Art remains in the upper level galleries, where visitors will bring with them the experience of their cross-cultural journey through the entrance and the lower level galleries.

Access Hurdle No. 4: Making the collection more easily accessible

The loans policy has been reassessed to increase loans to public institutions and the Gallery continues to support an active loans and travelling exhibitions programme which provides an equality of access to diverse and remote audiences.

Arts critic John McDonald from the Sydney Morning Herald commented that this “...implements a policy of ‘regionalisation’ that echoes a government re-election promise – and is re-enforced by the appointment of the National Party’s Peter McGauran to a joint Arts portfolio...”⁹ The National Party traditionally represents country electors and is in coalition with the governing Liberal Party. Here is an example of a beneficial trade-off between the policies of government and a major public institution.

Access Hurdle No. 5: Reaching the widest possible audience, locally, nationally and internationally

Since its opening in 1982 the NGA has developed an innovative and diverse programme of exhibitions and public programmes, which recognises that people learn in a variety of ways and that learning occurs formally and informally over a lifetime. Exhibitions are planned to meet the interests of a diversity of audiences and a daily programme of events is organised around them. Recent exhibitions have included, and I will mention just a few:

The painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story: 1937-1997 – a ground breaking exhibition which, through art, sought to tell the Wagilag Sisters creation story from the viewpoint of different Indigenous clan groups. Curated by Wally Caruana, Djon Mundine and Nigel Lendon, the exhibition took seven years of research and consultation to produce. Consultation with clan groups was ongoing throughout the entire period. It is impossible to go into any detail here, however such issues included the sacred nature of particular artworks and what could and could not be shown; how works could be displayed in relation to one another; whether the name of a work could be included on a label, let alone any interpretive information; and what images would be allowed to be reproduced for the catalogue and publicity material. The exhibition was a sensitively negotiated project. The opening event was attended by clan elders who, prior to the opening, had constructed a sand sculpture and who, in a symbolic ceremony, handed over the exhibition to the safekeeping of the Governor-General, Sir William Deane. Deane is a person who has engendered the respect of the Indigenous population, and at times the criticism of the non-Indigenous public, through his outspoken statements regarding the plight of Aboriginal people.

Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS was the first exhibition of its kind in Australia. Through art, some of which was by artists who were victims of AIDS, it confronted a highly emotional and extremely relevant issue in contemporary society. The visitor comments book became a memorial piece in itself.

Read My Lips: Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman was an exhibition of works by three artists who have created a significant impact on contemporary art by confronting issues of gender, power and the body. A talk by Jenny Holzer drew possibly the largest ever audience of young people to the Gallery.

The Europeans: Émigré artists in Australia 1930-1960. This exhibition could never have taken place without the co-operation of the artists, who loaned many of the works and who contributed to research for the exhibition and to the publication which resulted from the exhibition.

Visitor numbers to each of these exhibitions was carefully documented and used for market research. But care must be taken in assessing the success of an exhibition purely on such figures. Publicity or lack thereof, can and has made an impact, often to the detriment of exhibitions that deserve a far wider audience. For example, exhibitions like *The Wagilag Sisters Story* and *Art in the Age of Aids* may show lower visitor numbers compared to *The Queen's Pictures* and the *Turner* exhibition, but that cannot in any way, detract from the impact, relevance and importance of the former. If, indeed, the goal is to reach the widest possible audience, what must be addressed is an inequality in the distribution of funding for publicity and promotion and the reasons behind it.

Every exhibition whether it be a so-called 'block buster' or from the permanent collection, has associated with it a carefully planned programme of events. Examples from current calendars include: guided tours for Special Groups; tours as part of the annual Multicultural Festival, in Greek, Spanish, French, German and English; a Panel Discussion on Architecture & Museums; a series of talks, dance and music to mark the National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Commemoration Week; an Egyptian Dance Performance; and talks on everything from 'Yoga, Posture and Asian Sculpture' to 'Social Life and Fashion Journals of the 1920s and 30s'.

Engendering a sense of ownership among staff members is just as relevant as engendering ownership of the collection to the public. Gallery staff from curatorial, education, conservation and registration are required to present talks to the public. More than 200 talks and lectures were given last year. Likewise, everyone from the cleaner to the director is on a lunchtime roster to staff the front desk.

Staff members are also encouraged to attend conferences and seminars, not just to maintain awareness of current research, but also to contribute to it by the presentation of papers on the work in which they are involved.

As we enter the 21st century, encouraging the participation of the young in the arts is integral to the Gallery's role as a social enterprise. The NGA mails out posters and flyers to about 10,000 schools all around Australia. CD-ROMs on major exhibitions and a pre-visit video on the National Gallery are sent out to schools when a visit is booked.

Introductory discussion tours of the collection and special exhibitions are available or can be tailored to any aspect of the curriculum or class studies. Popular topics include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, multi-culturalism, the environment, gender issues, Asian studies, and the history of Australia. Discovery tour folders are available to help teachers discuss works of art during self-guided tours. 'Fast, Friendly and Free at Four to Five' are teacher sessions offered throughout the year, beginning at 4pm and ending at 5pm.

Programmes for students with special needs can be developed in consultation with gallery Education staff. Specialised programmes have been developed for groups of gifted and talented students. A Braille map and a large-print brochure on the Sculpture Garden are now available.

A set of Information cards focuses on 25 works of art in the National Collection. Written for teachers, the sheets have a colour image of a work of art on one side and descriptive text on the reverse, as well as suggested activities.

Last year, *An Introduction to the Collection* was produced to provide a reasonably priced publication of the major works in the Gallery's collection, with a brief description of each. It is a full colour publication and sells for under AUD\$10.00. I should mention it is not just aimed at young people.

Other innovative ways to stimulate the learning experience have included the *Hotshots* and the *About Face* exhibitions.

The *Hotshots* exhibition was developed to coincide with the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 27 of the Declaration asserts that everyone has the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community. The NGA supplied school students throughout Australia with single-use Kodak cameras and asked them to capture the unique qualities of their communities. The result was an exploration of Australia's diversity, its people and its land, seen through the eyes of young people.

The selection of schools for the project was based on geographical location and the students' cultural backgrounds, with the aim of representing a variety of cultures – Indigenous Australians, Australians with Anglo-Saxon, Chinese, Indian, German or Greek heritage. Schools were selected from remote, regional and urban locations.

About Face was another innovative project directed specifically at young Australians. Students from Australian schools were invited to send to the National

Gallery ten self-portraits painted by their pupils. Two hundred were laminated and displayed in the foyer of the Gallery until Australia Day in January 1999.

All the works from these exhibitions can be accessed through the National gallery's website, to which I will now turn.

In furthering the opportunities to serve both urban and remote communities, as well as the global community, perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of positioning the Gallery for the 21st century has been providing electronic access to the collection.

The website is part of a wider strategy to foster research in the arts. The site was launched in March last year and since then has expanded dramatically. It provides access to the whole collection (many works with accompanying images) to exhibitions, programmes and events, educational services, the Library, the Gallery Shop and connections to other important websites including Australia's Cultural Network and Australian Museums Online. The site is located at www.nga.gov.au.

At the same time as the website was launched, a touch screen computer system was developed for access by visitors within the Gallery. While it might sound somewhat like watching a sunrise on television while the sunrise is happening outside, the touch screen enables visitors to access all works of art in the collection, as well as providing an introduction to the Gallery and the collections, and a map of and information about the building.

As technologies change, the NGA will seek to use them to manage the national collection and also as a tool to make its collection and research available to the widest possible audience.

One of the advantages of speaking late at a conference is the opportunity to witness discussion before giving a presentation. However, in this case it has also meant that yesterday was spent doing some substantial re-writing of my paper to make it more relevant to that discussion. I know I have tried to cram a lot into my allotted time but I hope it has shown that an institution can take a stance and can take responsibility for raising issues that often governments may not tackle.

The NGA has made significant decisions in order to position itself for the 21st century. Stating its 'Vision for the New Millennium' has been one and actions to fulfil this vision are now firmly in place. Much critical debate has occurred in the process and will, without doubt, continue.

¹ National Gallery of Australia. Into the New Millennium: Corporate Plan 1999-2001. Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, 1998, p.5.

² Editorial. The Canberra Times, 26 October, 1998.

³ David Sequiera. 'Book review: Eulalia Bosch The Pleasure of Beholding' in artonview, summer, 1998-99, p.49.

⁴ Susan Jenkins. Ramingining Artists: The Aboriginal Memorial 1987-88. Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, nd, p.2.

⁵ Susan Jenkins. 'The Idea of memorials' in artonview, spring, 1998, pp.26-29.

⁶ Wally Caruana. 'Aboriginal Art' in artonview, winter, 1998, p.18.

⁷ Jenkins. *Op cit*.

⁸ Virginia Spate. 'The *Aboriginal Memorial*: National Gallery Birthday Lecture, 1991.'

⁹ John McDonald. Sydney Morning Herald, 24 October, 1998.