Are Universities 'Letting Australian Art Down'?:
'First Class' Aspirations or Second Wave Cultural Cringe?

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In a recent telephone conversation with a family member I mentioned my plans to visit the Istanbul and Venice biennales. 'I thought *you* were working on the Asia-Pacific!', came the disapproving response, accompanied, no doubt, by an upward roll of the eyes. It might have just been a family thing or perhaps my preoccupation with this region, but in reflecting on twenty plus years of research across the southern hemisphere, I saw no inconsistency in adding Europe to my travel cart. Nevertheless I was left pondering on this lingering perception of a bisected planet, given globalisation's so-called erasure of geographical demarcation and potential dissolution of all frontiers. How then might we think about the enduring imprint of Mercator's 1538 imaginary 0˚ line of latitude upon Australian society and its art? What does it mean to be in the Global South, at the bottom of the world? From a broader perspective, these cartographical conventions of north and south also represent cardinal points of deeply embedded political and moral meaning; within an established hierarchy of verticality north or 'up' is 'naturally' equated with ascendance and power (Murray 2009). 'Going south' therefore doesn't have the same ring. So whether or not I was getting above myself, Istanbul's Bienal may still, in this way, be considered 'southern' or marginal - despite its recent acceptance as part of international (read 'northern') art circuits, with the oldest and most esteemed model being 'Venice', which remains the apogee of achievement for Australian art endeavour.

To my continuing astonishment, after more than two decades of textual pleasuring and influential theories interrogating 'place', the 'other', ephemerality, and relational aesthetics in mainstream Australian art, a distinct lack of curatorial curiosity and scholarly effort persists in problematising the magnetic pull of the north. While this trajectory is valid, even necessary, for aspiring artists and other card-carrying *afficionados*, what is surprising is our seemingly undiminished dependence upon a vertical south-north axis and a lingering longing for endorsement from (largely) Euroamerican 'centres' which are, ironically, no longer deemed to exist. Conversely, disavowal at home of Australian/southern cultures appears to be growing.

In an avowedly multicultural country whose art world only seriously acknowledged its Indigenous artists in the late 1980s (Smith 1983) and 'Asian' art in the 1990s - strategically impelled by trade concerns and embraced by surprisingly few Australian institutions - there has been little sideways investigation of southern latitudes. Apart from the visionary South Project (2010), visual culture from neighbouring Pacific and Indian oceanic regions and the broader Global South (African, Latin American cultures etc.) are rarely visible in academic curricula, art museums and, alas, art history

conferences, including the prestigious 2008 Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art (CIHA) Congress in Melbourne. Contemporary art by Australians of Pacific heritage as a field of serious research still raises eyebrows as has, until recently, art from New Zealand; Colin McCahon and the 2010 exhibition, *Unnerved* (Page 2010) notwithstanding. Perhaps there's something about expanses of skin and sand that don't quite accord with present day art historical and theoretical systems of value, notwithstanding the occasional skateboard seen in the bumpy *strade* of Venice (Anon b).

In turn, there is much local discussion about Australia's marginalisation by the 'westernizing museographic imaginary' (Barriendos 2009) of northern art markets and major exhibitions. It seems that non-Indigenous Australia enjoys a less-than-desirable image abroad as a not-quite-exotic site of leisure, if recent editions of *Broadsheet* (2010; 2011) are anything to go by. Continuing Australian complaints about European 'disdain and prejudice' (Cruickshank et al 2010) rehearse an older whiff of 'impotent resentment from those in the margins' (Murray 2011). Without wishing to buy into redundant binaries, national identity or Australianised content or style, it seems that the 'provincialism problem' scab, so hotly debated from the 1940s to the 1970s (Phillips 1958; Smith 1974) has been picked off, bleeding – and bleating - across national and international newsprint that Australian art is not taken seriously 'up north', Where-it-Matters.

Certainly Venice matters most of all and the fabulous sums expended by the Australia Council over the past five decades testify to its mega-Mecca status for Australian art. This year's shoring up of Australian visibility is even more 'international'; in upping the Australian ante, the OzCo has, ironically, secured for anointed Australian exemplar Hany Armonious, not only a US curator, Anne Ellegood, from Los Angeles' Hammer Museum but three other US catalogue writers as well (Australia Council 2011).
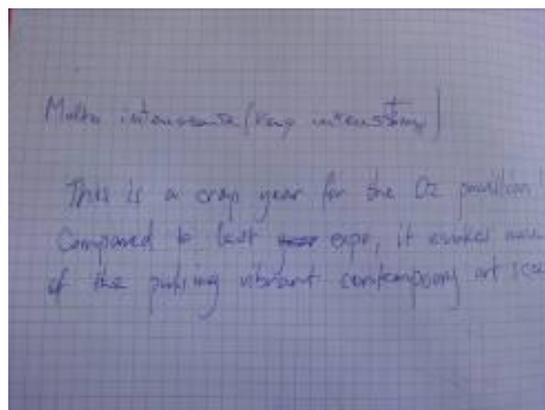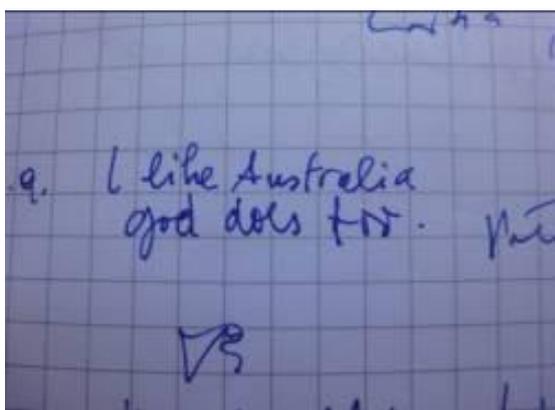
Comments Book, Australian Pavillion, *Venice Biennale*, September 10, 2011. Photo: Pamela Zeplin

These and similar stories raise some questions: in an increasingly globalised - or, as Jonathan Mane Wheoke (2011) would have it, 'gobble-ised- art scene, does the Ozco's shift in global stage management represent a new incarnation of Australia's 'cultural cringe' (Phillips 1958; Smith 1974;

Sanders 2011)? And why take seriously such apparently diminished national self-esteem? More importantly, a question not raised is: in desperately seeking legitimation from the 'north', what kinds of messages do these and many other instances of 'internationalising' Australia, where Europe and the US loom large, send to aspiring artists and students back home, not to mention broader contemporary audiences here and abroad? It's not as if the country isn't already swamped with dumbed-down US cultural values and corporate ethics, especially in Australian universities (Biggs 2002). And then there's those insidious American idioms and, 'OMG'!, the deplorable spread of Gen Y phony US accents when ironically,

> it has taken decades for our newsreaders and media presenters to sound Australian, ditching the elocution lessons and the faux British accent, and thus perhaps helping to free ourselves, especially of the panoptic shackles of British cultural and political colonialism which still exist in the sadly visible cultural cringe (Buckley & Conomos, p. 96).

This issue goes beyond 'verbal hygiene[e]' (Peters 1998, p.32) or predictable inter-generational scorn by resentful Boomers (or Gen Xs) for a younger, brighter, more assertive - and more entitled – demographic. Language matters deeply to culture, not as a static repository but as a living, adaptable heritage that tends a people's dreams, and if there's any doubt about relationships between loss of language, cultural displacement and confidence, Australian Indigenous experience speaks volumes: 'Language carries with it information about who we are, how we express ourselves and culture, and how we define the world around us' (VACL 2011).

In this culturally diverse nation so dependent on Asian trade, Asian language enrolments (other than Chinese) across the educational spectrum have, curiously, plummeted since the 1960s so that 'only a tiny proportion of Australian students currently learn anything at all about Asia' (Mottram 2010). Or the Oceanic Pacific. This short-sighted tendency, which ignores Australian artists with Pacific heritage, for example, has been impelled by a number of factors, not least, rapid globalisation of culture through digital technologies; a decade of economic rationalism and US-centric policies under the Howard Liberal-Coalition government, and Commonwealth ERA research policy prioritising 'international' research.

What, then, in multicultural Australian art Academe does this mean for students and staff in terms of identity and belonging? And more specifically, where does this leave our knowledge of Australian art and its history – Indigenous and non-Indigenous, made within the country, the regional neighbourhood and beyond? And what, if any, are alternatives to this deepening dependence on the greasy south-north pole of (historically thwarted) yearning?

As late as 1983 Terry Smith (1983) surveyed – and decried Euramerican dominated models of art history syllabi throughout the country, noting:

>…European, not Australian, art has been the main interest of historians working here, and…only quite recently have undergraduates had the opportunity to take courses in Australian art. with very few looking at Asian art and none at Aboriginal art... Most strikingly absent from Australian art history writing is a consciousness of the continuing contribution of aboriginal [sic] and minority group artists…The whole question of the relationships between black and white Australian artists needs to be explored.

Regrettably, after less than three decades desire for and knowledge of non-Indigenous Australian and/or antipodean art historical knowledge seems to be diminishing throughout art Academe. Of 119 Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships awarded between 1993 and 2010 only 2 chose destinations (Vietnam and China) beyond the US, UK and Europe (Samstag Archive 2011). Even the 2010 *Australian and New Zealand Art Association Annual Conference: Tradition and Transformation* – AAANZ is the peak body for Australian art research – saw 79 papers presented on Australian and/or New Zealand topics out of a total of 176 (AAANZ 2010) but without an online publication facility, few of these will ever be published in the hardcopy *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art.*

Given this declining knowledge base about ourselves, an expanded historical archive of Australian art and culture warrants particular support and dissemination at all levels of education. This could include cultural interactions across Australia's immediate regions and the constellation of micro-alignments initiated by artists as deliberate regionalist strategies. Often informal, relationally structured and with daring propensity for the unexpected, these endeavours eschewed art historical precision and art institutional orderliness, thereby slipping unnoticed beneath mainstream art radar. Many encounters remain largely unrecorded, leaving new generations without access to their own diverse genealogical stories, those 'archipelagos of modernity' (Enwezor 2009, p. 39) that '[shape] and [reflect] the cultural and historical values of a given community' (Grierson 2011). Consider, for example, the vacuum of information about Australian (and other) non-object art movements in the 1970s and 1980s against subsequent claims of originality for a proliferation of recent practices exploring 'relational intersubjectivity' (Cvoro 2005, p. 21); Even in the AAANZ's dedicated 2005 conference, *Transforming Aesthetics* this 'movement' has been (uncritically) attributed to the latest French fashion of relational aesthetics propounded by Nicholas Bourriaud (Pennings 2005).

For tertiary arts education and the broader arts sector this expanded archive would embrace numerous narratives of the far north, multiple (and previously obscured) stories of the south, and chronicles of the near north, that all tell of mutable contours between Australia, Australasia and the antipodes. In this way, an extended Australian visual history might also encompass, for example, Butler and Donaldson's (2008/9) proposed 'Un-Australian' art history which seeks to re-frame national narratives of mobility, even though these are still cast largely in terms of lineal northern hemisphere experiences of individual immigrants and exiles who 'stay, go or come'. Such peripatetic stories could be even further enriched by research into lateral excursions, and shorter sojourns, modest exchanges

and occasional residencies by non-Indigenous and/or Indigenous Australian artists – including craft practitioners - and their counterparts in/from New Zealand, the Pacific islands, South Africa, Latin America, Indonesia and other South East Asian countries. Audacious, tenacious, scandalous and/or failed, these various experiences may have as much to impart about collaboration, conviviality, cultural incommensurability - and institutional ineptitude - as more conventional success stories or imported texts written in and about Euramerica. At the very least, cross-cultural accounts of vanished local/Australian pasts would provide an accumulated body of expertise offering new opportunities for discovering 'south-ness'; such horizontal options may come in handy while awaiting for northern hemisphere recognition.

This will not be any time soon, according to Sydney gallery director Nicky McWilliam (2011) who recently sounded an alarm In a widely syndicated opinion piece, asking: 'Are universities 'letting Australian art down'? McWilliam bemoans Australian art history's vulnerability to a 'dysfunctional cultural cringe trumpeting the superiority of European-American art'. Despite the provocative rhetoric, her evidence was based on a few one liners from academics and a rudimentary 'online survey of ... art history and theory courses' at Australian universities which, apparently, revealed no 'mandatory ... course in Australian art history'. Had she contacted a few art schools, such as, for example, the University of South Australia where 'Australian Art, Craft & Design' and 'Indigenous 'Arts, Cultures & Design' are offered as core theory courses, McWilliam might have produced a more valid early warning signal. Increasingly in recent years, traditionally Eurocentric curricula in most art schools have now expanded to admit Australian indigenous art, notwithstanding minor resistance to mandatory courses.

A sole, anonymous respondent to McWilliam's piece - an art history academic at the University of Melbourne – explained that Australian art is also available under various titles in a 'good number of subjects' (Anon 2011). The respondent added that 'students don't flock to subjects with purely Australian content' but this was less 'a reflection of University policy' than 'symptomatic of student choice [and] lack of curiosity implicit in not absorbing some basic knowledge about our own cultural heritage'. As a viable option for emerging artists, Australian studies may not, on first encounter, appear relevant in a graduate-saturated art world fixated on the contemporary elsewhere. Celebrity matters, and cultivating image and impact as emerging 'creatives' is a major part of (often mandatory) professional studies and curatorial curricula burgeoning throughout Australia during the last decade. This development directly aligns with University vocational compliance obligations in assisting national employment figures by ensuring graduates are 'work-ready' (Trounson 2011).

 It is no surprise, therefore, that fewer Australian sources seem to be used in student research in favour of trans-Atlantic (and to a lesser extent, Asian) models, as well as theorists with predominantly French accents. Therefore, since few, if any, Australian artists enjoy the international fame of so many of their northern peers, the prospect of students backing 'losers' as role models from a 'culturally nondescript and unthreatening' (Geczy 2010, p. 240) or 'flat white' country (Buckley & Conomos 2011) is hardly, 'like', sexy.

Whether or not Australian art and its history is cool, waning or even unwanted, larger issues concerning the value and status of Australian culture in this country are not easily dismissed, especially against a long background of inadequate Federal and State government cultural policies that are increasingly determined by a focus-group mentality (Buckley & Conomos 2011). Frequently couched in inane bureau-speak, many of these official arts proclamations echo a society dismissive of or embarrassed by local and/or national arts production – unless acclaimed abroad. Again, a quick flashback to the 1970s Whitlam Labor era would reveal Australian arts, including Indigenous culture, being held in much higher esteem in this country and worthy of international status. (Hornung-Leis 2005). This situation has been steadily deteriorating, as Buckley and Conomos (2011, p. 96) note:

> ... [I]t has taken decades for us to have the ethical, existential and political courage to start thinking for ourselves about ourselves and what we might value as art, culture, innovation and knowledge, to value our artists as much as our scientists, our educators, as much as our elite athletes.

This failure of cultural nerve is evident in much current university training and research. The perplexing silence surrounding McWilliam's challenge may indicate art academics' preoccupation with more pressing matters as they struggle to achieve research targets set by Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) criteria. While this national measuring instrument at last acknowledges studio-based practice as a field of research, university metrics still prioritise text-based 'publications', which until mid-2011, meant 'A*' ranked Euramerican journals; these are thin on the ground in visual arts' assigned Field of Research codes. Since 'it is widely recognised that auditing regimes change the activities they seek to measure' (Cooper et al 2007), the effects on Australian publishing, discourse and art practice by this culture of audit signals yet another lurch from local to narrowly defined 'international' research (read 'overseas').

At least one Australian university has recently mandated higher degree examination processes that include at least one 'international' (read overseas, northern hemisphere) examiner. While reasonable for text-based examinations, practice-led visual arts examinations use two or more attending external examiners. Such a requirement is already proving ludicrous since highly esteemed Australian artists and academics are regularly excluded pending individual appeal processes. This new 'world class-ness' policy (Swannell et al 2002) of importing (ostensibly superior) experts aligns closely with ERA priorities and potentially signals prohibitive cost and complexity, even though this does not constitute best Australian visual arts practice (Baker et al 2009); for example; what would this mean for examiners of Australian Indigenous art? Combined with savage university course rationalisations (Zehner 2009), the survival of quality Australian art production and research may well be at risk if not visibly valued, actively promoted and perhaps embedded in core curricula. Indeed a national research survey like the 1997 *Towards Internationalising Visual Arts Curricula* (Leong et al 1997) may now be timely for Australian art studies.

If the issues raised by this paper appear to exhume the binary and lineal geo-politics of Terry Smiths 'provincialism problem', this is not intended. Nevertheless, despite the complexification offered by theories of transnationalism, globalisation and metropoloitanism, Australian art and educational institutions remain preoccupied with Euramerica while interest in and support for the diversity of artists in this country seems to be diminishing. So the issue is not that our artists and institutions understandably aspire 'upwards' to take advantage of distant opportunities – markets, exposure and cultural exchange - but that uncritical dependence on these trajectories often results in solipsistic victimhood and national angst when met with indifference or exclusion. Combined with government unwillingness to seriously support local and/or national endeavour, influential Euramerican and east Asian global art agendas of inclusivity may well require re-consideration regarding matters of residual imperialism. 'It is high time', David Malouf reminds us, that 'we stopped submissively seeking approval from others, whether it is our Asian neighbours, the British or the Americans, and start believing in ourselves as a people' (Malouf in Buckley & Conomos 2011, p. 96).

Certainly, countless Australian artists already operate deftly within increasingly complex entanglements of place, race and identity beyond these two circumscribed hemispheres of increasingly asymmetrical relations. As they move between different zones of proximity, they understand that ''world-class-ness' is identifiable in the most surprising places, often trapped inside the most inadequately resourced institutions but, despite that, thriving and brilliant' (Swannell et al 2002) - even in places like Istanbul, Ipswich or Indonesia, not to mention Venice! So my concern is not about what Australian art should be or how it is - or is not - received in international nodal points of cultural power and influence but why Australian society, and more specifically, its art institutions, remain so timid and restricted in outlook when so many alternative possibilities present themselves nearer to home. Surely, art isn't just reduced to fame and fortune - or is it? Could this reluctance to 'jump sideways' be inhibited by Australians' traditional unwillingness to learn languages other than American English? Thus 'outlook' seems to provide the operative word for our ever externally oriented culture; it's entirely possible that deeper reflection might confront the hollowness of our national self-esteem, still haunted by the the guilt of colonial dispossession.

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