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Arts for a multicultural Australia: redefining the culture

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Such keywords as 'community' and 'culture' are inherently ambivalent and have no fixed and formal meaning precisely because they are constantly subject to struggle and contestation in which different groups and subjects seek to hegemonise their 'definitions' over the definitions of others. (Mercer, 1990, p. 78)

Because multiculturalism uses the rhetoric of inclusion it cannot properly address the politics of exclusion. (Creighton-Kelly, 1991, p. 4)

The history of multicultural arts in Australia has been a chequered one.¹ The problem is that politicians cannot afford to be too out of step with public opinion, whereas artists cannot afford not to be. Responding creatively to multiculturalism often involves being out of step with prevailing orthodoxies—this is true globally as well as locally. As many commentators have noted, the history of multiculturalism and the arts in Australia is bedevilled by immense amounts of energy spent in preparing policy and in consulting in the field but insufficient sharing of this information at the various levels of government. Also, policies are unevenly implemented and this, in turn, has led to further frustrations both among arts bureaucrats and artists themselves (Andreoni, 1992; Blonski, 1992).

This book is an attempt to illustrate the strategies and gains developed in the field as a way of ensuring that some of this energy is not lost and that it can serve as a basis for further development. This chapter will explore some of the issues embedded in the whole philosophy and rhetoric of multiculturalism and the arts both within

Australia and in comparable societies which are also coming to terms with the cultural implications of their demographic diversity.

As a few of us noted a couple of years-ago, the 'National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia', NAMA (July 1989), did not actually mention any details about culture beyond the general principle that all Australians should be free to express their cultural identity 'within carefully defined limits' and should be able to share their cultural heritage. Noting these omissions, a number of interested people gathered and the results were the 'Plan for Cultural Heritage Institutions to Reflect Australia's Cultural Diversity' and the recently drafted NAMA guidelines, titled 'The Big Picture', prepared under the auspices of the Australia Council and the Office for Multicultural Affairs, and endorsed by the Cultural Ministers Council at its meeting in February 1993. Work in this area highlighted for some of us a problem at the heart of multiculturalism and the arts—that is, how to conceive the relationship between state patronage and the arts.

It may be wise to pause at this point and attempt to clarify what we mean by culture, let alone multiculturalism. There are two dominant meanings of culture which circulate in general discussions. These are:

- the sociological or anthropological meaning where culture means every aspect of life. It is an inclusive notion of the various elements of everyday life; for example, food, religion, sport.
- the meaning which concerns us now. It is the notion of culture as the arts, though this too is often conceived quite inclusively to include heritage and the traditional—that is, museums, art museums, libraries—or what a culture wishes to preserve as manifestations of its imaginative and intellectual life.

This does, however, beg the question of the relationship of the two meanings of culture to each other and their further relationship to the state.²

Providing a summary of relations between culture and the state, the British doyen of cultural studies, Raymond Williams (1984), has described the interaction between them in provocative terms. The state itself may be seen as providing a particular type of culture of its own when it displays state power in the spectacle of state rituals, 'a kind of lying in state of the national heritage' which occurs, for example, at the opening of Parliament and comprises a 'consecrated' version of culture. During the Bicentennial, there were, of course, many Australian examples of this phenomenon of the culture of the state rather than the state of/and culture. Another interesting contemporary development is to be found in the arts as tourism or business entertainment, which can mean that cultural policy becomes

intertwined with foreign policy. Thus, Australia's current push for the Asian market is reflected in the concomitant emphasis on forging cultural links with the Asia-Pacific area. Finally, and importantly, Williams distinguishes between the state as patron and the state as promoter of the arts. In the case of the former, this initially involves supporting practising artists and gradually moves into the area of improving access to the arts for a greater proportion of the population. For example, the ideology that the 'masses' should be 'educated' or 'civilised' by being exposed to elite cultural forms such as opera and ballet (Rowse 1985). One problem with this model is that it tends to favour the traditional 'fine arts' at the expense of the developing new arts such as those connected with the media and communications. This also continues to be a point of controversy in Australia where a compromise has been reached by setting up separate bodies to govern both broadcasting and film and television. At present, it provides another related problem within arts funding bodies when artists or projects do not fit neatly into the traditional categories of literature, performing arts and visual arts but insist on working at their edges—a feature, incidentally, of much innovative art.

Williams also discusses, in broad terms, the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' cultural policy, locating the former, for example, in Eastern Europe where there is an enforced 'preliminary definition' of the arts. The latter, 'soft policy', is not overtly so prescriptive but can be just as insidiously retrograde in its covert forms, hiding behind 'vague terms' such as 'excellence'. This book amply demonstrates encounters with 'soft' policy and the troubling definitional categories which at times hamper the development of new artforms, particularly in the area of multicultural arts.

Taking further Williams' analysis of the state and its role within the nation-state's cultural development, there is a sense in which the arts have often been used to serve political ends and it is hard to disentangle the two in abstract ways. Apart from maintaining, both in principle and practice, the notion of arm's-length funding, the best one can do is to prevent the arts from serving excessively narrow political ends, particularly when the arts are inevitably bound up with state patronage and most of the so-called advanced capitalist societies are committed to state subsidy for the arts. The bottom line is always the inescapable fact that any funding is ultimately dependent on whichever political masters are in power so that there is no way one can ever really dissociate the agenda for subsidising the arts from its dependence on a political agenda—nor is this necessarily a desirable aim. Indeed, the arts should always be perceived within a wider political framework but not within a narrowly sectarian one.

This brings us to the second key term 'multiculturalism' and what

this means in relation to culture defined as the arts. Multiculturalism is a vexed term but then all the terms used to describe demographic diversity have been unsatisfactory and indeed there exists a history of those who use the limited nature of the terminology quite successfully as a way of preventing change. As Australia marches towards republicanism there is a renewed urgency about redefining all its aspects including its cultural ones. Multiculturalism usually means those groups, particularly in the wake of World War II, who deviate from the initial core groups of colonial settlers who came mainly from England and Ireland. Initially, the term used to designate their collective nature was 'Anglo-Saxon' but increasingly this rendered invisible the main dissenting tradition in Australian history, that of the Irish (often Catholic and working class) who saw themselves in opposition to the patrician Anglo-Protestant group. Thus, the term 'Anglo-Celtic' arrived with opposition from those Australians of Irish descent who, rightly, object to being yoked to their traditional enemies. But, in a sense, the history of this controversy is, precisely, multicultural, and quite acutely reflects the diasporic dilemma at the heart of a multicultural philosophy. That is, to what extent can one draw upon a history generated elsewhere and the traditions and institutions which accompany it and not be considered a traitor to one's new country? The Irish diasporic experience is a good way to measure and explore this aspect of national patriotism. Similarly, an 'Anglo' symptom of the diasporic experience is the continuing obsession with the British royal family and its various activities. The current struggle over the status of the monarchy is another symptom of the diasporic condition which, in this case, is played out among the hegemonic group rather than among those traditionally tagged as multicultural or ethnic. In other words, while Australians energetically debate the issue of the monarchy they are not necessarily as tolerant of other kinds of diasporic battles deriving from other versions of diasporic histories. For example, the struggle around who has the right to the name of Macedonia exercises the energies of a large number of Australians but is consistently represented in the media as an example of ethnic divisiveness and an unwarranted preoccupation with irrelevant (and unpatriotic) histories.

There has been much criticism of the philosophy of multiculturalism on the basis of its accompanying terminology. In the case of the Australian experience, if multiculturalism becomes synonymous with 'migrant' (for example, migrant writing or migrant art) then one is often in the ludicrous position of attempting to stretch this notion of migration to cover second and even third-generation Australians. Given that Australia's colonising history is only 200 years old, one can understand the anxieties such demarcations generate but it does

not solve the problem. Thus, we continue to be presented with anthologies, for example, of 'second-generation immigrant women's writing' leading one to speculate on what that term 'migrant' is being asked to convey since the usual connotations of migration such as being born overseas or of not speaking English, patently do not apply to the second generation. Usually, one discovers that, in such contexts, 'migrant' actually means non-Anglo-Celtic—that is, those who bring traditions and languages from outside England and Ireland. If multicultural translates into 'ethnic', then one is faced once again with a covert message where ethnicity (a characteristic pertaining to any group) somehow is not deemed relevant to the hegemonic groups. For the record, ethnicity etymologically carries connotations of 'heathen' or 'pagan'—in other words, the barbarians at the gate or 'the other'. Hence, perhaps the quite understandable resistance by artists themselves to being designated 'ethnic' artists.

As well, the linking of multiculturalism and ethnicity presupposes a kind of ethnic absolutism where the community is both synonymous with a particular cultural formation and maintains its closed boundaries in terms of language and cultural traditions. The community is thus bracketed as an homogenised entity and frozen outside history and contemporary interactive relations. Such notions of community also precipitate the anxiety-provoking shadow of the ghetto which always lurks just behind invocations of ethnic. Under the guise of a supposedly tolerant recognition of difference the deployment of the term ethnicity often heralds attempts to consign ethnic groups to the margins into a type of enforced separatism which will not 'contaminate' the mainstream. To add to these complexities, the other side of the separatism imposed on ethnic groupings is that they are paradoxically lumped together into a melting pot model so that emphasis falls only on 'compatible differences'—that is, those differences which in practice correspond to the familiar aesthetic categories of the dominant group.³ Thus, in this case we are dealing with a framework of Western values in which those who derive from the non-West are placed in a negative relation to the prevailing standards. The onus therefore falls on them to 'prove' their aesthetic value or their professionalism or the fact that they are dealing with the innovative development of traditional artforms.

Inherently problematic as well is the relationship between these perceived ethnic communities and their originating cultures. For example, one might ponder the validity of the widely held assumption that these forms need constant nurturing by an originating home culture. The interaction with such 'imaginary homelands' is a far more complex affair, as is demonstrated by the following statement from the Australian media theorist Ien Ang:

It is the myth of the (lost or idealized) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive to diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject. But what is the status of this 'homeland' myth? (Ang, 1992-93, p. 6)⁴

For example, rather than simply perpetrating old forms, one of the exciting new elements in the diasporic experience at the heart of multiculturalism is the idea that something quite new develops as a result of transplanting to a new context and interacting with other groups. It can generate a new hybridised cross-cultural art. This is, incidentally, to be sharply distinguished from superficial examples of cross-cultural work as, for example, in aspects of world or fusion music where there is a plundering of surface characteristics so that ethnicity becomes reduced to a kind of fashion accessory which can be pinned to a cultural product and, far from creating something new, manifests an empty formalism or superficial imprint of the exotic. This is not what is meant by the development of the third space which can develop as a result of the diasporic experience and we will return to this in the latter part of this chapter.

Another controversial aspect of these issues relates to the denigration of the cultural element itself. Now it has often been said of both culture and multiculturalism that they are ways of managing difference, in the sense of controlling its divisive aspects (Dominguez, 1992). There is some truth in this and one way of exploring it is to look at the history of the indigenous peoples and multiculturalism. As in the disputes across the Tasman where biculturalism rather than multiculturalism prevails, attempts to establish multiculturalism have often been seen as diversionary tactics for taking the heat out of claims for autonomy and sovereignty by indigenous peoples.⁵ This phenomenon exemplifies the tendency to fall into oppositional binaries in which, for example, white Australia is placed in opposition to black Australia, a homogenising and reductive gesture in which the differences within both categories are eclipsed. Flanking this is the anxiety that acknowledging cultural difference is a way of harnessing other differences such as the 'visible differences' which traditionally pertain to race and relate to racism, religious differences and political differences. In other words, appeals to cultural difference are a way of rendering all these differences as both 'only' cultural and therefore somehow benign in the sense of not having to be taken too seriously. In other words, it dismisses the arts as an unimportant area of socio-political struggle and, furthermore, sees them as a way of defusing such socio-political struggles. Now, artists are the last to concede this and any art which is not 'dangerous' in

some sense is perhaps not worth considering, but whose art and whose dangers are, of course, completely open to debate.

But having looked at some of the problems and difficulties surrounding the very mapping of the terrain what might one speculate about multiculturalism, arts and the future? To some extent, it does not hurt to look at this question in a global context.

Lucy Lippard's *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, celebrates US versions of multicultural arts and reveals many elements not entirely foreign to the Australian context. Documented there is the excitement to be found in the concept of border cultures which implies cross-border hybridities and the resultant recognition of the essential hybridity of all art. In other words, there have been cross-cultural influences for a long time and it has not always been a matter of Western European art 'borrowing' from and 'developing' the art of marginalised or non-Western cultures. On the other hand, one notes that when the non-West borrows from the European tradition it is often accused of being 'derivative' (Lippard, 1990, p. 26). It is really the concept of pure art that is in question—whether it is a pure European tradition (a contradiction in terms because there is no cohesive homogeneous Europe in the first place) or a pure British one (once again there is no pure British tradition).⁶ In terms of forging a national culture, it is instructive to look at the statement offered by Eduardo Galeano:

National culture is defined by its content, not by the origin of its elements. Alive, it changes incessantly, it challenges itself, it contradicts itself, and it receives external influences that at times increase it, and that are wont to operate simultaneously as a threat and a stimulus. (Lippard, 1990, p. 14)

Moving from the US to Britain, *The Other Story* is a celebration of Afro-Asian arts in Britain which 'took eleven years to realize' (Areen, 1989, p. 105). It is described by the curator, Rasheed Areen, as:

... a story of those men and women who defied their 'otherness' and entered the modern space that was forbidden to them, not only to declare their historic claim on it but also to challenge the framework which defined and protected its boundaries. (Areen, 1989, p. 9)

It is also not a study of ethnic arts narrowly conceived, but:

... is firmly located within or in relation to the mainstream; it reflects the complex articulation of modern developments in art that have taken place in post-War Britain. (Areen, 1989, p. 106)

It is also a challenge to those structures and assumptions which have

resulted in the absence of non-European artists from the history of modern art. Such challenges are also confronting Australia as it begins to engage fundamentally with its role in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is also in the nature of such projects that they attract controversy and critique. Kobena Mercer makes the point that:

The Other Story had to carry an impossible burden of representation in the sense that a single exhibition had to 'stand for' the totality of everything that could fall within the category of black art. (Mercer, 1990, p. 62)

This is a prevailing problem with so-called marginal or minority arts. Any manifestation is immediately subject to the critique (impossible to satisfy) of its non-representativeness which begs the question as to why such art should somehow be inherently more representative than mainstream art. Such questions also riddle Australian attempts to raise such issues. Examples of such instances, in a sustained effort, occurred during Rudi Krausman's editorship of *Aspect* and, in another medium, Manfred Jurgensen's journal *Outrider*. There are also such 'one-off' attempts to capture the energy of the multicultural moment as *Art Link* (vol. 11 Autumn/Winter 1991). Like *The Other Story*, such one-off examples suffer from the pressures of attempting to tell the whole story all at once because one never knows when the opportunity may occur again to provide a comprehensive survey of the richness and potential of these marginalised artists and their activities.⁷

The need to go well beyond this phenomenon becomes clear as Australia struggles to come to terms with its Asia-Pacific geopolitical situation. Of immense help, but currently under-utilised, are those Asian-Australians who have long been a part of Australia, including the artists. Here are Australians uniquely qualified to act as cultural mediators but the focus still appears to be concentrated on bringing European Australian art into the Asia-Pacific region and of exposing European-Australian artists to residencies there in order to educate them into non-Western aesthetic sensibilities.

An example of a different kind of mediating figure in North America is Trinh Minh-ha, a film-maker and theorist whose theoretical and creative work represents a challenge to the current packaging of knowledge and of aesthetics within a Western framework (Trinh, 1989; 1992a; 1992b). In Australia, the work of the media theorist Ien Ang presents an enlightening insight into the problematics of the diasporic condition when she asks: What does the tension between 'where you're from' and 'where you're at' imply?

There is . . . no ideal-typical migrant, and it would therefore be

unwarranted to collapse this diversity of experiences into a master-narrative of *the* migrant experience when the question of 'where you're from' threatens to overwhelm the reality of 'where you're at', the idea of diaspora becomes a disempowering one, a hindrance to 'identity' rather than an enabling principle. (Ang, 1992-93, pp. 6-12)

Ang supports this analysis by exploring the issue of being Chinese within the diaspora and concludes that too many restricting elements are contained within projections of what it means to be 'authentically' Chinese in relation to imagined versions of the mother country. While conceding that because of their inherent transnationalism, diasporas have their role to play in undermining essentialist and totalitarian notions of national cultures (Ang, 1992-93, p. 13), she concludes that the very indeterminacy of identity built into the notion of diasporic identity is a productive state. In a related comment the film critic Audrey Yue suggests:

The notion of ethnicity must move beyond the boundaries of the familiar if a representational politics of location (that is, the contingent displacement and reterritorialisation of what is 'home') is to be effected. Its markers of difference must contest not just the conventional aesthetics of form and content, but more crucially, challenge the visibility that ethnic difference as a tokenistic object makes present. Becoming Asian-Australian is a continually evolving contemporaneity of not just crossing the territorial boundaries of one or the other, but of confronting them in their controversies. The challenge of this space is the realm of the outsider-in and the insider-out, and beyond that which is predeterminedly visible and familiar. (Yue, 1993, pp. 19-21)

Both critics emphasise the need to move beyond fixed notions of ethnicity and of cultural authenticity in some predetermined way. It is the in-between provisional process, the strategic location and the hybridity of all art which is affirmed here. Some have called this postmodernism.

In postmodernism, particularly in its intersections with postcolonialism, the margins fight back and take over the definitions which are the aesthetic legacy of the master narratives of Modernism and its pillaging of the Third World (for example, Picasso and African art). What we have now is, for example, the Empire 'writing back' from within its imperial core (as Salman Rushdie's inspired phrase suggests) as exemplified in the recent history of the Booker Prize in Britain which has gone to non-establishment figures such as Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ben Okri, all witness to the hybridisation of English culture. One thinks also of the 'new internationalism' fuelled by realignments and redefinitions emanating from the new Europe. This too is accompanied by a realisation that:

. . . the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. (Bhabha, 1993, p. 25)

In Australia, we have the rise to prominence of artists whose cultural hybridity is an acknowledged aspect of their artistic practice, writers such as Brian Castro and, to some extent, David Malouf (1985).⁸ Within Aboriginal culture we have the productive 'inauthenticity' of artists such as Trevor Nickolls or Lin Onus (Isaacs, 1989) as well as the increasingly enigmatic figures of Tracey Moffatt or of Mudrooroo. In other words, we are confronted not with the supposed authenticity of traditional culture safely located somewhere in the past as ethnicity or indigenous purity but of an urban hybridity which acknowledges the inevitable cross-cultural interactions of the past 200 years. Not only do these 'minority' arts bristle with experimental and avant-garde attributes, but they have always done so and they in turn dislocate and deterritorialise assumptions concerning the homogeneity of a putative national or mainstream culture. As Trinh puts it in another geopolitical context:

The challenge of the hyphenated reality lies in the hyphen itself: the *becoming* Asian-American; the realm in-between, where pre-determined rules cannot fully apply. (Trinh, 1991, p. 157; see also Bhabha, 1993)

The strength of Australia lies not simply in its diversity but in its recognition of and support for this diversity, this provisional ethnicity. In a recent article the prominent art historian Robert Hughes (1993) has lauded Australian multiculturalism as a more tolerant and intelligent version of this ideology than the sectarian tribalisms he identifies in the US. It may well be that there are many aspects of Australian multiculturalism which are worthy of praise but we should also ask ourselves whether the benign versions Hughes locates here exist because we are inherently a more intelligent or tolerant society or whether it may be perceived rather differently from the viewpoint of those who have been involved for two decades in trying to gain recognition for the complexities permeating cultural difference. Sometimes it appears that we have been faced by a persistent refusal from the hegemonic ethnic majority groups to share their space in any fundamental manner or to question their own premises and aesthetic categories in the light of the challenges coming via the diasporic incursions from many parts of the world to these shores. Such gains as appear to have been made often seem to amount to the 'rhetoric of inclusion which cannot deal with a politics of exclusion' quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

However, there is much to be gained by focusing on the excite-

ment generated by those who have managed to break through the old assumptions and categories and to achieve what Lucy Lippard has termed a 'mischievous insurrection' (1990, p. 204). Traditions are always invented constructs rather than natural occurrences and Australia needs to reinvent its own new republican versions with the full participation and enthusiasm of the whole population. The results should allow for a measure of irony and should acknowledge the existence of double or multiple audiences.

Ultimately, it amounts to a refusal of pure and authentic homogenised national cultures frozen within a chapter of imperial history or eternally depicted in binary opposition to one originating homeland. Instead, we should be exploring the local and global implications of the diasporic networks with their alertness to positionings and the many and varied elements which are in play within both cultural production and its consumption.

Notes

- 1 For the history of such policies within one significant institution see Blonski, 1992.
- 2 For a useful discussion of contemporary theories of culture see Milner, 1991.
- 3 For a discussion of how these tensions operate in a related but different national context see Owusu, 1986.
- 4 See also Gunew, 1988, chapter 6.
- 5 One thinks as well of the Canadian experience where the policy of multiculturalism was introduced in the early 1970s by Prime Minister Trudeau as a way of deflecting the focus on French-Canadian separatist claims.
- 6 This is exemplified by the work of Tom Nairn (1977) and, in different ways, by Eric Hobsbawm and his influential analysis of the invention of national traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).
- 7 One attempt to go beyond this fraught phenomenon are the activities by a group of people involved in producing a comprehensive Bibliography of Australian Multicultural Writers (Gunew *et al.*, 1992) and the setting up of the Multicultural Literature Collection at Deakin University in Victoria.
- 8 It is well-known that Malouf is ambivalent concerning the relevance of his ethnic hybridity, but see Malouf, 1985.

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