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An inconstant politics: thinking about the traditional and the contemporary

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Conditions and exclusions

The discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism suggest that there is not a great deal to be gained from framing aesthetic strategies too sharply around notions of either the traditional or the contemporary. Dichotomies of past and present, which exist within institutional culture as either a strategy for inclusion or as the demarcation of exclusion, do not adequately account for the multiplying differences of position across cultural definition. The rate at which meaning, in relation to identity, shifts is rapid and the dynamics of cultural change threaten to overturn each classificatory accommodation, each new category of recognition that we move towards. And yet, at all levels of political life, there are strident formations and contestations over what pasts and presents there are and how they are to be defined. This struggle over the naming and renaming of participants exists as a formalised political dialogue which has been both encouraged and supported by governments in Australia for almost twenty years.

While the process of political negotiation and debate over questions of past/present, visible/invisible, speech/silence endeavours to enunciate difference, it also shapes the production of symbolic spaces that increase the isolation of the subjects. The futurism, the reformism of 'planning a nation', of visualising heterogeneity (for example, mixed ethnic, racial, religious communities) as part of political and economic legitimation, relies on a continuous production of coaxing public mythologies. Heavy investment in nation

building is not only a commitment to complicit falsifications about individuals and communities but it is also a strategy for the regulation of nationalisms expanding from within. Although the goal of a tolerant heterogeneity cannot guarantee or reproduce tolerance, neither can it repress the proliferation of that heterogeneity, either in emergence or decline. But this is no argument for returns. There can be no returns, as there can no longer be imagined on the globe any unitary monocultural, monolingual culture or society. Those in positions of cultural authority have generally grasped the reality that the unities on which Western museums and pedagogical institutional histories maintained their internal plot, no longer hold. Individuals operating within the museum, the gallery, the archive and the academic repositories are now under enormous pressure to consider and produce complex responses to an array of often conflicting cultural meanings.

Yet why should a push for cultural production built on a politics of differentiation cause such national anxiety? It seems that the instruments of the state find themselves in a psychic and political struggle; internal contradiction threatens the heart of the beast itself. The inheritance of nineteenth-century evolutionism, its belief in ordering the world's societies into a linear sequence, combined with twentieth-century relativist anthropology and ethnography, perpetuates the world as a 'Great Collection'. Those collecting traditions consumed the world's societies as objects of someone else's knowledge realised as coffers and receptacles containing other people's material and psychic presents. The American anthropologist James Clifford (1989) outlines the 'salvage paradigm' which operates in the connoisseurship and collections of the museum, constructing history as a pursuit of authenticities and redemptions based on a range of nostalgias (Clifford, 1989, p. 73).

The idea of 'tradition' in the anthropological model meant the conservation of other people's 'ethnographic presents' as their actual pasts were redeemed from the impact of disruptive changes produced by corruptions, transformation, migration and modernisation. Being 'saved', being collected, essentially meant being stolen, appropriated and kept pure. In a Western society that is endeavouring to expand its nationalisms as a sign of radical democracy, encouraging the entry of its minorities into the national archive under the mediating persistence of the anthropological model of tradition also ensures continued ethical and moral instability in the system. Although the emergence of culturally distinct groups and individuals reflects the need for contemporary recognitions, the terms and conditions upon which recognition is negotiated are difficult and often unsatisfactory.

To 'belong' in the history of the West was satisfactory if you were dominant: to 'belong' if you were other than that, immediately cast

you into loss, ambivalence, defence and resistance. To 'belong' was to be an object, a curiosity, victor's plunder, scientist's data, patron's charity, sociology's survey; a situation to be refused at all cost and yet, often the only avenue guaranteeing some kind of survival, some visibility. Being compromised in the role of a minority, and compromising oneself in return in order to persist, becomes an unwritten contract within a greater historical process.

In the last six years in Australia, there have been concerted efforts to implement these kinds of 'tradition' conserving heritage practices in relation to minorities within museums and galleries as part of the national multicultural agenda. That process, an instrumentality of the major nationalistic project of multiculturalism has not been without its critics, both of the right and the left.

Heterogeneity and postcolonialism

If the museum model of 'tradition' is based on an exploitative and repressive anthropology, and it is argued that the model for a contemporary national heterogeneity descends from that origin, now overlaid by a reformist context, it remains to be asked: what is the relationship of both tradition and heterogeneity to 'modernity' and to contemporary culture?

Does heterogeneity cut across epistemologies for using tradition as a marker of past/present, old/new? Does it equally cut across any definition of modernity in precisely the same way? In the nationalist context are uses of definitions of both 'tradition' and 'modernity' undermined and so remade by heterogeneity?

Within the museum there is anxiety because a politics of expanding representation is tantamount to incitement to anarchy. A surfeit plenitude of heterogeneity challenges the museum's intrinsic logic for history as a series of successions. How is it now to continue making boundaries, sequences and orders? What can its contemporary taxonomical thesis be when the taxonomy threatens implosion? If, in the West, perception was imperial, coming from a perceived point of power and expanding to incorporate all meanings and drawing them into itself, a fission of incorporation now inverts and pours back into the eye (so to speak) which cannot contain what it sees within its controlling singularity. Arguably, because it never knew how to see in the first place, it was never able to recognise, only to name and to collect. A panoply of vision now challenges hegemony to blindness, and therefore to anxiety about what it is now politically required to see.

In the museum, 'seeing' and 'history' were always a revelation of someone else's society and culture in displacement, being held in

material 'trust': in ambivalent possession. The present situation sees taxonomies dividing up *ad infinitum*, formally and structurally threatening to replace the familiar linearised history of displacement. The act of categorisation is pre-empted by the potency of categories now waiting to be named. Postcolonial criticism, especially the work of Homi Bhabha, describes this attack on, and polarisation of, the anthropological as the surge of 'counter-modernity' (Bennett and Collits p. 53).

Instead of leaping beyond the simple dichotomies—history versus modernity, tradition versus contemporaneity—narratives of counter-modernity leap fearlessly into multiples of multiples refusing essentialised identities while simultaneously acknowledging their function within the appearance of new orders. Bhabha writes of the 'double inscription' (Bhabha, 1988, p. 12), where each objective is constructed on the trace of that perspective that it puts under erasure; each political object is displaced in relation to the other and in the critical act.

In the crisis of cultural expansions from within, there emerges theoretical resistance and contradiction. Even when 'tradition' persists across the many cultural differences of minorities, the 'impact of modernity reveals connections to inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it' (Clifford, 1989).

There is, nonetheless, a sense that the rapid expansion of theory as intervention exists as the equal opposite of resistant and reductive stereotypes which still live in the silent denials of racism and class divisions. Elitist repudiations concerned with maintaining their own relevancy construct minority ethnicity as conservative and retrospective nationalism lagging historically behind an imagined 'contemporary' that is given the attributes of innovation, originality and progressivity. This dichotomy is both exploited and repudiated in the competition for economic equity and representation. It remains convenient as a means of distributing funds, authorities and projects across preferred constituencies (themselves predicated on histories of professional bias). Individual or community efforts to negotiate these boundaries move between creative theoretical and political initiatives for reframing culture and institutional resistances, which may include both tradition or the contemporary but are likely to be equally xenophobic. They find themselves dealing with the inarticulacy of inherited historical burdens, mistakes, chauvinism and fear in the face of an imagined unknown void.

The argument for 'counter-modernity' as a critical intervention into racism and xenophobia concentrates on the hope of a shared formalism, a language of held-in-common methodologies. It establishes enquiry into what means we have and what methods we need; what languages, what concepts for recognising 'traditions' within

heterogeneity that speak of adaptation, resistance and assimilation without falling into archetypal dichotomies. Counter-modernity recuperates conflict and disorder, locates emergences and acknowledges the unconscious discarding of whole areas of traditional life while guarding and reproducing others. Cultural difference comes to represent migration as well as rooting within and between groups and within and between individual persons (Trinh, 1987). The emphasis is on the removal of everything fixed so 'that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicised, and read anew' (Bhabha, 1990, p. 21).

This account of an expanding national and local heterogeneity that consumes the traditional as inheritance and the contemporary as a place for renegotiating the terms of modernity is the 'in-between space' that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. This theorised space connects with the usurpations of modernity while at the same time displacing them, it strategically layers marginality over the theory of the avant-garde which covets cultural and individual originality. Contexts become interchangeable, politics may appear inconstant and the language of definition and position becomes transparent. Welchman (1992) describes visual modernity as:

. . . staged between frame bounded modernism and the inter-generic, inter-discursive and materially heterogenous gestures of the avant-garde. (Welchman, 1992, p. 35)

Those voices coming from the peripheries of cultural difference, from places of disputed authenticities, in theory, exploit modernity in the process of creating counter-modernities and counter-narratives. That is why it is possible to superimpose Welchman's text dealing with the avant-gardes over Bhabha's proposals for a counter-modernity:

If it is apparent that most modernist movements that actively promoted their own theoretical self-definition did so in relation to the calculated production of a discourse of limits and transgression . . . indeed the governing metaphor of cultural modernity, the avant garde itself, is predicated on a theory of a transgressive occupation of the other's territory. (Welchman, 1992, p. 35)

Yet, it is a politics of identity which distinguishes between them. The political, which is at stake in the peripheries, is more than a primary notion of aesthetic successions. It is much more than the mask of primitivism continually being returned to the museum. Instead, 'the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis' (Bhabha, 1990). The margins of modernity do not emerge without narratives of 'splitting, ambivalence and vacillation' and yet it is dismemberment that allows for

the reconstitutions of identity and the appropriation of power. Like the robot cop in the film *Terminator 2* (with a different ethical perspective), after every decimation, the mercurial fragments, the traces and residues somehow re-assemble and keep on going.

The reference to science fiction is more than a populist technofantasy. In all agendas, from those of governments providing their constituencies with hopes for minor economic futures, to the academic and theorised languages of sociologists, anthropologists and cultural critics, all eyes are set firmly on the future.

Postcolonial time post-dates notions of traditional pasts and of the dispensable contemporary. Postcolonial time is future-time strategically placed in the present. For the museum, investing in the traditional is one way of safely controlling others' 'ethnographic presents'. But once those 'ethnographic presents' are imagined as incarnating past, present and future in the one historical moment, when identity is a compression of possible moments and surges (a mass density of meaning), the patriotic notion of culture which looks to the 'legitimacy of past generations as supplying cultural autonomy' (Bhabha, 1990, p. 298) is in alien territory. Literally in an/other space and time dimension. This new ethnography can fissure temporality because it is also the method by which identity constructs itself. 'The subject has to split itself into object and subject in the process of identifying its field of knowledge' (Bhabha, 1990, p. 301). Shifting the fixed place of the past in this way transforms a nation and its components of difference from symbols of modernity into becoming the symptom of an ethnography of the contemporary.

This futurity operates beyond the familiar narratives of national cohesion. Nikos Papastergiadis (1993) writes of familiarity differently:

It commences from either the shattering of the previous self, or the process of writing the self into a foreign space and in turn re-inscribing it as 'familiar' . . . it is not just about remembering the place you left behind but also about what emerges from the 'nostalgia' for the place called the future. (Papastergiadis, 1993, p. 11)

For such authors and others negotiating cultural meaning across already heavily controlled domains, the key exclusionary clause as to why this futurity needs to be removed from the processes of modernity is always consistent. It returns to the condition of individual subjectivity and its unremitting and perverse difference, 'the continuous homecomings and incessant beginnings within the present' (Papastergiadis, 1993, p. 12).

Bringing it home

In Australian cultural policy and practice we have seen significant distribution of national and state funds into the creation of infrastructures supporting 'ethnic minorities'. These have developed parallel to the bureaucratic organisations established in relation to Australian Aboriginal peoples and they have been essentially constructed around definitions of community and community practices. These changes have occurred gradually over twenty years, and, more intensely over the last six years, have been directed towards the funding of arts groups from variously demarcated ethnic, migrant and Aboriginal minorities.

Until the 1989–90 period, national government primarily interpreted communal visibility as ethnicity, in the same tradition as the visibility of aboriginality—that is, welfare, employment, education, health and housing. A great deal of government money for minorities was directed into research and collection of data around these concerns. Government did not put money into cultural issues. By 1989, however, the National Agenda for Multiculturalism had begun to exert political pressure in the cultural sphere by applying the fiscal lure. Museums, representing the traditional context, have been symbolically easier targets to access. Public galleries have been a further five years behind and are just beginning to respond along a narrower line consistent with the pursuit of 'aesthetic originality' which ignores the problematics of such frameworks and prefers to neutralise questions of cultural difference into a more 'global' perspective. The museum and the gallery respectively have increasingly deferred cultural, ethnographic and aesthetic histories to the nationalist sign.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs's 'Heritage Plan' responding to the National Agenda was directed towards an official recognition and instrumentation of the positive significance of 'the margins' to the museum establishment proper. This focused on heritage conservation for Australian minorities on guidelines similar to National Trust classification recognition of sites of importance and the collection of its diverse people's artifacts. Prior to this, state and national institutions such as libraries, museums and some galleries responded to the question of Australian peoples and the national minorities in representations of folk culture (often connected to ethnic festivals, exhibitions and performances) as expressions of tradition in popular culture remarkable only because it was held in the imagination as organic and ephemeral.

The early initiatives of successive Labor governments to establish national agendas for Australian multiculturalism were directed at major institutions and characterised by extremely restrictive terms of

reference around questions of minority equity and representation. The framing and funding of these initiatives certainly encouraged debate but also made it significantly difficult to interpret actual outcomes and values for possible policy implementation and cultural change because the context seemed so driven and predicated on strictly economic and percentile vocabularies (Gertsakis, 1992). In addition, public cultural institutions have been requested to present professional overviews in relation to multiculturalism in a point-to-point response to the given agenda in exchange for funding support. This has certainly resulted in a more self-conscious strategic political environment in which the institutions carefully position themselves, but it remains to be seen what will occur beyond the structural exercise.

Much of this activity was spearheaded in the lead up to Bicentenary displays of nationalism, and although this has had a flow-on effect it has also been paralleled by a backlash. Principal organisations (for example, the Australia Council) have expanded to nominate ethnicity in relation to non-English speaking background (NESB) arts practitioners, but the issues around the multicultural debate have been occluded and displaced to a degree by the newer, more glamorous component which has come in to fulfil the twin-headed resource category of 'culture marching with economics' of the Asia-Pacific. Clearly, national government has set the agenda for cultural interrelation, repeated with minor variations, but always keeping the objectives conservative—that is, addressing change to the already known. In museums, for instance, elements that would be considered of value are those that can readily be admitted into already existing frameworks. Museums define cultural groups on the basis of anthropological practice (methods of industry, ritual, craft, belief, genealogies and, related to this, patterns of settlement and demographic distribution and histories). The admittance into the museum for the minority in question is on the basis of an unstated and residual racial or cultural purity that defines the group. Often, the interpretation is bound to images and demonstrations of progress or nostalgia or both. This view of visible minorities is historical and, as such, non-threatening to the museum. It establishes a space in which there is an overriding narrative of concord and community based on the familiar. Those who work within the institution and whose task it is to construct these placating mythologies face community dissatisfaction and disagreement about efforts made to produce cosensual or homogenising cultural images. The assumption of a museum process based on the strategy of community involvement elides differing individual subjectivities within groups and even the presentation of conflicting group subjectivity as a focus of the

interpretation. This aspect of the construction of the 'ethnic narrative' does not make it to the final story of the exhibition.

Attempts to deal with cultural histories based on ethnicity have come in Victoria from the Museum of Victoria and the State Library of Victoria. For example, 'The Italians' (in 1988) and, more recently, exhibitions dealing with the Muslim communities and the Italian and Jewish communities of Carlton (in 1993). At the State Library, an ongoing archival and exhibition project, 'Building a Country', has used documentary photographs to trace and represent Chinese, Greek, Italian, Vietnamese and Japanese 'histories' in Victoria. These exhibitions have drawn minimal public discussion and debate. It is difficult to assess their impact despite community attendance and general distribution (travelling exhibitions). The critical debate which has occurred has been met with institutional resistance and defensiveness. This is no doubt exacerbated by the marginal relationship of these projects to the main agendas of those institutions. Project curators also face the difficulty about how a project might be conceived, constructed and contextualised when using strict terms of reference with limited funds and with very little time for research and discussion. Short-term measures provide some measure of visibility but what remains to be seen is how the project of the minorities is sustained and developed.

The museum and the library both remain potent institutions for the relationship between public culture and national politics for they not only determine negotiations over tradition and heritage as functions of dynastic power but they are also repositories of other people's material and psychic objects. Power, as custodianship and specialised control, is something that authority in this form is unlikely and reluctant to become confused about, thus the museum remains precariously detached from the challenge of culture, for it is inclusive (given space, money and agenda): its platform remains history as totality.

Art museums, the national galleries of art, maintain their historical relevance on the basis of contemporary collections and exhibitions and have come very late into the discussion about cultural representation. One must ask: why so late? In what form is the current involvement? Ironically, in a field where cultural contestation occurs and emerges in representation, where visualisation is primary, little effort has been made to consider the place of marginalised or hybridised forms. In the existing culture the problem seems to be a primary failure and inability to recognise, articulate and validate.

The institutional structures for the reception of art continuously edit and censor and only sometimes permit terms and conditions for visual meaning that are foreign to the dominant and narrowly socialised pathways to interpretation and value. Contamination in

contemporary artistic aesthetics is a carefully controlled cultural commodity, and if the 'impure' (whether it be political, sexual, racial or formal as an aesthetic genre) is considered inadequately framed by the processes known as conventions to the aesthetic regulators, it fails to enter the arena of legitimation. This amounts to a refusal based on over-professionalised consensual knowledges, which use evaluative transparencies such as 'excellence' to make random judgments over a broad range of often unrelated and oppositional contents. Art work that is not produced 'within the formats of an instantly recognisable critical contemporary arts practice' (Hoffie, 1992, p. 36), that is not conscious of the 'dominant aesthetic', will not appear on the walls and will not be represented in the principal arenas of mainstream marketability. It fails the test of the 'cool, distanced criticality' expected in the territories of originality and innovation (Hoffie, 1992, p. 36).

Current European debates foregrounding cultural diversity in the arts and the role of institutions are responding in more complex ways to the pressures of national proximities and changes which are occurring at a faster rate than in Australia. A conference held early in 1993 in Amsterdam canvassed issues of art and translation, ideas of alternative consciousness, the move from 'ethnic arts' to 'new internationalism', arts policy in a multicultural society, defining 'quality' in the arts and the question of audiences and new participations (Lavrijsen, 1993). The increasing complexity of cultural identity and the importance of creating new frameworks for translating and speaking emerge as paramount concerns for artists, arts administrators and politicians. Equally, the multiplicity of strategies to give expression to the contradictions and dilemmas involved in cultural practice, the need to analyse the mechanisms deployed to judge art and the context in which the judgment is made, and the requirement for a transcultural/multicultural frame for discussing the elements of artform, colour, technique, content, expressivity and quality are also important (van Dijk, 1993).

Sarat Maharaj describes the struggle to ensure the responsiveness of institutions as a two-way movement between modernism's autonomy of artistic criteria and the 'non-aesthetic criteria which had been discarded in the arrogant moments of high modernism' (Maharaj, 1993).

Whatever the desires for cultural renegotiation may signal, they are still bound by social and political circuits which construct the sociology of admission. These determine and define the market and their boundaries are marked by the professional attachment of artists to teaching institutions, art spaces, national and international exhibition curation, commercial gallery links, art prizes and the

hit-and-miss visibility of individual reputations in an endeavour to parallel agenda currencies for funding.

The shift from an earlier set of resistances, which saw the politics of critical multiculturalism as didactic and interventionist, to the conspicuously acceptable encouragement of artists to engage their perceptions with the Asia-Pacific regions, extends rather than resolves questions of displacement and recognition. The locally 'outside' may encourage changes in the shape of a public national agenda, but it also leaves the conditions at home significantly unexamined.

The public artistic agenda may encourage cross-cultural projects such as the 'Vietnam' exhibition (Waverley Gallery, 1993) which exhibited work primarily by two Melbourne artists produced in collaboration with artists from Vietnam. It also redefined those excursions into nationalism which keep returning Western notions of the preciousness of privileged artistic perception. Art and artists in this context function to 'transcend' and possibly neutralise the conditions of cultural difference. The exhibition made 'multicultural' sense and yet it was ironic that the Vietnamese communities of Springvale and Glen Waverley in the south-eastern corridors of metropolitan Melbourne were invited, turning the art exhibition into a 'community event' with food and associated festival organisation. These communities were there in a sense 'on loan'. Neither the work exhibited, nor the particular collaborations involved necessarily meant anything to many of the Australian-Vietnamese who came along. This was confirmed by signatures and comments in the gallery visitors' book. One comment remarked, 'Is OK but don't mean anything to me'.

It is difficult to accept the connection in this exercise between 'high art', Australian Foreign Affairs and the national agenda for multicultural minorities. The placement of this exhibition within the Asian migrant community produced an uncomfortable ambivalence. Diplomatic and ambassadorial functions are not new to art history, but the idealism that is experimented with here is sharply in disproportion to the experience of minority ethnic and racial communities in our domestic and cultural hierarchies. The line between community recognition and the patronising of that community is a very fine one. It is both compelling and distressing to observe how issues which originate in the crisis conditions of racial injustice and ethnic exclusion and misrepresentation are so often usurped by elite culture while the peripheries remain precisely where they are. Neither is it a consolation to observe how the 'centre' acknowledges the powerful educating effect it may have experienced in the cultural interface which it can now add as 'multiculturalism' to its public conscience.

More successful experiments that derived from the response of art communities to funding possibilities post-1988 were special one-

off events such as *Art Link* magazine's 'Arts in a multicultural Australia'. This publication has now assumed a significant place in the documentation of projects which have been linked for political, community and aesthetic reasons to the multicultural agenda.

In terms of intellectual links within contemporary art communities through writing and critical theory, notions of the political were read throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s through texts that centralised 'margins, peripheries, appropriation' and especially 'the other' to artists' concerns. But locality failed to make an appearance. The local only figures as a zone of 'deterritorialisation'. The conditions of production, the aesthetics of the sociology for the production of contemporary art meanings in this country remained essentially referential. Those conditions remained absent while theories of displacement figured singularly, passionately and without distraction from the process of deconstructing the 'work's' meaning. Aboriginality and Aboriginal art alone was allowed to represent political locality. It would become the common 'signifier' (simplifier) within the culture for all resistance, all difference. Racialism within high culture became privileged while nothing else very much changed. Lined up against this 'purification', multiculturalism would just come to represent negative bureaucracy, greed and philistinism.

And yet there were other efforts which were sporadic and not always clearly able to find a target. The National Association for the Visual Arts initiated a multifunded research project *Outside the Gum Tree* (Andreoni, 1992), to enquire into the visual arts in Australia from a multicultural perspective. It looked at the state of public art institutions, collections, attitudes and policy in terms of cultural identity, social justice and economic efficiency issues. Its conclusions were to make an optimistic plea for non-discrimination, co-operation and the proposal of strategies for the future. Although the research produced data that profiled the visual arts community, its use of Tasmania as a model for the connections between institutional practices and migrant communities was an obfuse historical paradigm for the complex nature of multicultural histories accessible in mainland eastern capital cities.

In South Australia, multicultural artworkers have had a history of both cultural contestation, productivity and successful funding strategies that places them as a political arts lobby organisation ahead of those found in eastern states. The organisation bridges three decades of art activity and has persistently challenged cultural definitions of aesthetic production. Their art practices have insisted on the imbrication of traditional forms (vis-a-vis community projects) with contemporary media.

Efforts from within national public art galleries are few. In the late 1980s, the Australian National Gallery in Canberra (particularly



*Eugenia Raskopoulos,
no. 7 from the series
'Dangling Virgins . . .
Suicide for Women in
Ancient Greece',
1992, silver gelatin
print, 49 cm × 59 cm*

its photographic collection) put a small amount of money into purchasing work that came from the 'migrant experience'. With changes in curatorship and changes in agenda, this interest has dried up. With less funding generally available for acquisition of art works, the money returns to the 'mainstream' and to the big themes.

In Melbourne, at the National Gallery of Victoria, the then newly appointed Director, James Mollison, announced his plan to make available an access space at the gallery for ethnic communities to install their own exhibitions and displays. His outlined intentions were to bring in more people to the gallery, to make it 'useful' to the community. But he went further in demarcating what, in his view, was the difference between traditional art and fine art:

The distinction I draw between folk art and the fine arts is the fine arts don't rely on previous patterns and previous styles. They are not repeating something that is well-known, much loved and that employs enormous skill. Fine artists work with their minds and imagination rather than with tradition. There are artists in Australia of non-Anglo-Saxon background who have risen to be among the top practitioners in the country and yet their work is collected not because of their ethnic background but because of the quality of this product made by an Australian. (Smith, 1991, pp. 24–5)

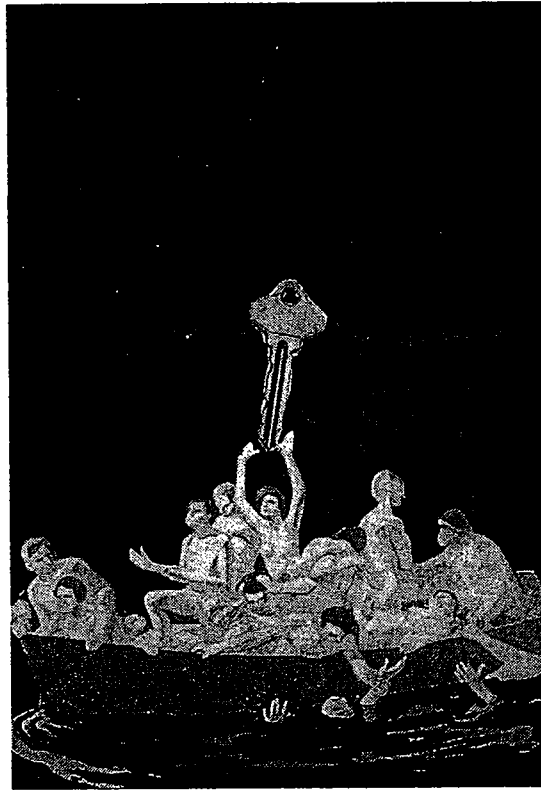
John Barrett-Lennard (1992) also observes the concealing museum from a non-partisan position outside the critical 'ethnic ghetto':

The major changes happening in art museums now can be taken as indicative that its core precepts, which allowed it to maintain its authoritative position are under serious threat; their potency has somehow been lost. Without these structures of support the art museum must inevitably change, looking to renew or rebuild its base with new appeals to the public. In this sense a turn to the public, giving it increased prominence in a whole range of areas can be seen as a move to broaden one's base, to recognise previously ignored interests and communities, and to become more publicly accountable. In this sense it is an extension, an attempt to find new modes of operating and to make questions of audience more central for these activities. At another level it reveals the crisis of legitimacy. Even as it opens up or extends to new audiences, it can also be employed in an attempt to maintain a prominent position within a hierarchy of power by invoking the public as an authority. The prominence granted the public can be linked with uncertainty, a confusion about audience and purpose, a search for relevance, a way out of modernist closure and postmodernist fragmentation. (Barrett-Lennard, 1992)

Running into tradition

Evidence for cultural and conceptual omission in Australia is spectacularly clear. It is revealed by a sentimental colonialist ethnicity of essentially Protestant Anglocentric lineages based on the cluster inheritance of pioneer heritage (explorers, settlers and merchants) and now cultural entrepreneurs. This model has imprinted the figurations for authority, nation, authenticity and, fundamentally, the legitimacy of the 'right to rule'. It is visible as a normative set of cultural acceptances and it is unable to see itself. It is only able to see the 'others' who offend by signalling possible destabilisation and by making dangerously contingent all that such an historical origin holds dear to itself in its definition of culture and cultural values. It refuses to consider the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity except as a materialism of formalist successions. The permutations for producing its conceptual parts (academics, scholars, researchers, curators and critics) only recognise centres even though they may dispute centres and peripheries, dominant histories, minor histories, great art or lesser art. This is because the culture's reason, or rather its mode of continuity, is based on the instrumentality of historical power.

A society structured around a precise history of dominant/passive power relations does not really want to know how the past (tradition,



*Sigi Gabine, Ship of Fools
(detail), 1988, mixed
media/painting*

heritage) actually constructs the present or future (contemporaneity). It does not really want to examine the historical consequences of form and its hybrids. Instead it wishes erasure, which it interprets either as nostalgia or innovation. The 'new' in such a cultural figuration must continually present a sophistry of new beginnings, new births, new origins which effectively conceal the truths of its formations and its means for arrival into the new. For its means for arrival into innovation are located in places that must never be acknowledged. In this critical assessment of contemporary artistic values, the migrant form, the hybrid craft, the transitional, the ill-informed can never be allowed to be construed as art or as identity. This is because the psychic aversion within the dominant culture to its own parlous and sorry moment of migration and hybridity still lives with it despite using 'contemporaneity' as a shield, as a form of forgetting and rewriting of the consequences of its own 'traditions'.

But in this list of poorly negotiated segregations defined as 'multicultural arts practice' and nationalist miscegenations based on disavowals (called Australian art and culture), there have been some efforts to address the products of a place teeming with contingent identities and histories but also contingent art practices.

Recent leaps for cultural difference in contemporary visual arts

comes from just such origins and whose work has been visible in the exhibitions I have discussed, were absent from the Biennale. Criticism of these omissions came in reviews and in commissioned papers (Brauer, 1993). Nikos Papastergiadis questioned whether the prospect for cultural interaction had moved beyond 'the "vampiric" structures of cultural domination'. He asked whether a definition of 'agency and culture must include the subjectivity and structures of the other, otherwise the dialectic is frozen in the gaze of self-reflection' (Papastergiadis, 1993).

As a child of post-World War II immigrant parents, I regularly expressed the desire to return home. My father discouraged me with the warning that 'the past was a dangerous place'. Was this the past of 'tradition'? Was he advocating 'modernity, contemporaneity and futurity' as a safer alternative? What he did not know, until experience taught him otherwise, was that running from one's own past becomes a running into something even more dangerous: someone else's past. The difficulty arises when you perceive that you are caught up in someone else's efforts to escape. The response to this might be one of no longer running, just journeying.

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