

## **Curtin Enlists!**

### ***John Curtin A Man of Peace, A Time of War***

*John Curtin A Man of Peace, A Time of War*, initially curated in 1995, is a major social history exhibition which demonstrates the practical application of new ideas within the shifting field of contemporary museum practice. This exhibition largely avoids presenting authentic objects and artefacts in favour of images, text, audio, video and convincing facsimiles of original documents, thereby allowing the creation of a flexible, transportable and dynamic exhibitionary space free from any association of museum exhibitions as mausoleums to the past.

Perhaps however, *A Man of Peace, A Time of War* functions not simply as an example of contemporary museum practice, but rather as an explanatory text for the recently developed multi-million dollar John Curtin Centre at Curtin University of Technology in Perth Western Australia, as well as a much needed 'shot in the arm' for the profile of an admired but almost forgotten former Labor Prime Minister, after whom Curtin University is named.

Developed by the Australian Archives to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of John Curtin's death, the exhibition was designed to travel around Australia before being permanently housed in the John Curtin Centre. As the complex was not yet constructed at this time the exhibition curator, Rowena MacDonald worked from the plans of the Curtin Gallery within the centre to ascertain an appropriate exhibition configuration.

The exhibition is made up of a series of connected plywood, steel framed marquees, housing text, images, artefacts — both real and simulated — as well as audio and video components. The outside of each marquee are silk-screened with old newspaper text and images which relate to the themes dealt with inside. This magazine style approach results in a very familiar and accessible balance of text and image and is a stylistic device successfully employed within the actual body of the exhibit.

Four individual exhibits titled 'On the Homefront', 'The World at War', 'From Poor Boy to PM' and 'The PM is Dead' constitute the main body of the exhibition. Only the exhibit concerned exclusively with the life and achievements of John Curtin is presented as a chronology. Other components of the exhibition are arranged as self-contained themes, scenes and tableaux; perhaps a conscious curatorial attempt to avoid presenting complete and unassailable historical truths and seamless, singular points of view.

Since permanent installation of the exhibition at the John Curtin Centre small components vaguely enacting various historical tableaux have joined the original four exhibits. Currently on display is 'John Curtin's Study', containing a mixture of original artefacts, facsimiles and props, none of which are identified as originals or copies. In this exhibition it would appear that text and images are the most important means of disseminating information; objects being included with the intent of simply further illustrating the narrative and providing visual stimulus. In reality however, the presence — and overall absence — of artefacts impacts on the narrative more profoundly than is immediately apparent, echoing current contentious fields of debate within contemporary museum practice over 'whether to privilege context over objects' (Karp

1991: 12-13). Neither argument can claim to lead to an 'historical truth' and in this exhibition for example, the highly selective inclusion of such humble artefacts as reading glasses and a funeral corsage suggests objects have been conscripted to add depth, humanity and perhaps pathos to 'drier' text and imagery.

Although the exhibition tackles many disparate aspects of the life of John Curtin, of life in Australia and — to a limited degree — world events of the time a dominant motif clearly emerges both through the narrative and the aesthetic of the exhibit. This motif is austerity and it is used both to illustrate the war time situation in Australia and as a reflection of the war time Prime Minister, a down-to-earth leader who himself practiced austerity measures in order to support the war effort. The exhibition design itself is in turn constructed as an expression of the theme of austerity. Unfinished plywood structures for example are somewhat evocative of sanitised tent cities, which were at this time a temporary home for many enlisted Australians. Ultimately, John Curtin the Prime Minister and Australia the nation, become virtually indistinguishable as Curtin comes to exemplify the qualities of war time Australia.

The exhibit 'World at War' is the only major component of the exhibition concerning itself primarily with Australia and International affairs. It details on one panel John Curtin's fabled defiance of Winston Churchill in insisting Australian troops not be re-routed to the theatre of war in South East Asia but sent directly back to Australia from Europe during World War Two. Although quite neutral in narrative tone the panel fits neatly within an assumed and unchallenged popular Australian history. A break with Britain and subsequent reorientation towards America in both trade and security is quite predictably detailed in the adjoining panel.

Today our alignment is still with the US and increasingly less with Britain, as exemplified by a recent domestic push for Australia to become a republic. Although the exhibition doesn't consciously trivialise relationships with Britain or elevate Australia's actual relationship with the US the narrative is clearly less than sympathetic toward our former colonial administrators, effectively mirroring current sentiments. Is this how it really was, or is it simply a viewpoint compatible with how Australia's foreign relations have developed?

American museologist Stephen Weil argues that 'historical narratives do not so much recreate or represent the past as they legitimise the present' (1995). Such motives, it could be argued would be more strongly evident in narratives closely linked to institutions of power — like universities — which have a necessary interest in legitimising their present, past and future. Similarly, British cultural theorist Tony Bennett suggests that history museum displays are significant not for portraying the past as it really was but in revealing their relation to presently existing discourses (1988: 13). As previously mentioned *A Man of Peace, A Time of War* was developed by the Australian Archives in collaboration with Curtin University, both powerful government funded institutions concerned with generating and maintaining useful constructions of national identity. It would seem likely that the nature of these institutions might impact profoundly on the particular view of John Curtin and conversely of Australia with which we are presented.

What both Bennett and Weil might see in this exhibition is a powerful social institution attempting to gain greater legitimacy and prestige as a player of national and international significance by reviving and marketing the history and virtues of the

university's namesake. Thus in an age of public cynicism in the political process and national leaders the exhibition manages to very successfully present — and arguably create — a leader thoroughly appropriate to his time. Interestingly, generous funding for the John Curtin Centre and the exhibition was granted during a Labor government administration in the early 1990s.

In keeping with the concerns of modern museological practice the exhibition does attempt to accommodate multiple viewpoints within — or at least at the periphery of — the exhibition narrative. This is achieved through both a traditional visitors book and a specifically designed feedback station entailing a comments sheets and pin-up board. A nearby exhibition panel of comments by prominent Australians, while offering few dissenting voices amongst broad spectrum praise for John Curtin, does at least offer the alternate possibility that for example John Curtin did nothing to further the cause of the Aboriginal population or that he was in reality an ineffectual leader posthumously canonised to aid the cause of Labor politics.

These balanced efforts, however, are perhaps somewhat usurped by the dominating context of the exhibition. Has the exhibition narrative itself in fact become enlisted as an expression of the symbolic intent of the wider institution as it is currently oriented? The John Curtin Centre is clearly the showpiece of Curtin University. It houses the chancellery where VIPs, overseas and interstate visitors and experts are initially received, as well as culturally elite institutions like the John Curtin Centre and Prime Ministerial Library. A self consciously international scale development, the centre is conceivably the latest and most ambitious attempt to overcome Curtin University's geographic marginality and re-situate the institution closer to a perceived cultural centre.

Perhaps the John Curtin Centre itself is best viewed as a fractured manifestation of 'historicizing territory', an attempt at generating a sense of place and of belonging, and with it the pride, veneration, prestige and loyalty accorded such 'always existing' places (Poulantzas 1980: 51-2). It can of course only ever be an illusory projection. John Curtin himself had no association with the Perth suburb of Bentley — within which Curtin University was constructed — during his lifetime. The institution itself was in fact not to exist until decades after John Curtin's death and no link to John Curtin was actually generated until the 1980's when the Western Australian Institute of Technology became Curtin University.

The scale of the John Curtin Centre suggests the community which the development and hence the exhibition is oriented toward transcends its local suburban geography. Its intended primary audience is fee paying overseas students, visiting lecturers and academics, as well as politicians, political leaders and sponsors who fund the institution and specific programs within it; all of them demanding value for money, prestige and recognition.

Despite this, the exhibition content itself is probably no more compromised than that of most social history exhibits. It is its enlistment into the broader discourse of the John Curtin Centre however, which threatens to overwhelm a modest and balanced curatorial approach. After all, the sweeping vistas, grand colonnades and elegant covered walkways of the John Curtin Centre only really make sense in view of its Prime Ministerial association, suggesting the real role of the exhibition may be to function as cultural wallpaper as much as an educational tool.

Thankfully, the exhibition unwittingly ruptures this seamless relationship by contrasting too sharply with the grandeur of the enveloping complex. Uncomfortably diminutive, the exhibition structures are read as oddly insubstantial, as if they could be collapsed at any time and with them the newly resurrected — and esteemed — history of John Curtin PM.

Significantly, several aspects of the exhibition have been modified since its initial installation in the John Curtin Gallery. Canvas roofs have been removed from the marquees and national flags installed in their place. Although the flags do serve to fill the cavernous ceiling space, they're a loaded prop and any effect on the overall exhibition narrative is certainly worth considering. In addition newly blacked out wall areas effectively shrink the space and set the historical exhibition area apart from the pristine expanses of white in the surrounding galleries. Finally video displays are now re-positioned overlooking the exhibition displays instead of near floor level. This fine-tuning suggests efforts to integrate the exhibition more successfully into the gallery space are being made, resulting in a much-improved version of the original layout.

Much of what is interesting about the exhibition *John Curtin A Man of Peace, A Time of War* however, emerges only in considering its context. Unlike similar history exhibitions presented in purpose built museums, the increasingly challenged assumption of a neutral space in which unbiased information may be presented is here even more difficult to sustain. Accustomed to the strategies of the corporate world, which pragmatically ascribe their image to any available subject which sympathetically promotes their product, the recently reformed alliance between an 'economically

rationalised' university of technology and its historical figurehead is easily viewed with audience scepticism.

A student writes on the feedback station 'why couldn't they spend the money on equipment for the design school?' eloquently foregrounding the effects of current crises in tertiary funding. This simple statement makes it at once to justify such a large expenditure on what is essentially a showpiece when cuts in education are translating into losses of tertiary services. It also makes it difficult to reconcile the apparent humility of John Curtin as presented with the extravagance of the structure in which his testimonial is housed. *John Curtin A Man of Peace, A Time of War* however, ultimately remains an accomplished exhibition, presenting interesting sites of multiple intent which reveal — often by default — many complex and problematic relationships to an 'enlisted past'.