

## **A journalist's perspective on the museum world**

The first time that I was involved with museums was in 1990 when I went as a person-in-residence to the Australian Museum to work on multimedia. Following that I have worked with a range of museums in Australia and in the UK on multimedia and web-based projects, including the Australia Street Archive (<http://www.AustraliaSt.uts.edu.au/>) and the Tumblong project (<http://www.tumblong.uts.edu.au/>). I consider myself an outsider, rather than an insider, and while I have a professional background as a radio and television journalist, documentary filmmaker and in multimedia, I am also an academic in the field of media studies. So I want to talk about museums from the point of view of media studies, and how we might think about the role of museums from that perspective.

There are many obvious differences between the media and museums, but there is also a very significant similarity: both museums and the media are involved in the production of meaning through representation. They do this by attaching importance to events, processes, objects and people, in signification and contemporary historiography and through all of that they are actually involved in the construction of subjectivity and identity for their audiences. Newspapers, radio, television and museums tell people what it means to be part of a larger society, part of the larger 'imagined community', to use Benedict Anderson's term.

There is a perspective in media studies on two issues which are relevant to the 'Exhibitions as Contested Sites' research conducted by Fiona Cameron and her colleagues. The first is the notion of objectivity, and the second is contestation.

## **Objectivity**

At the 'Contest and Contemporary Society: Redefining Museums in the 21st Century' symposium held in Sydney in November 2003, Elaine Gurian suggested that museum professionals are moving on from objectivity as a term and have more or less dropped it, preferring to talk about impartiality. In journalism there has been a similar tendency, where balance or fairness is mooted as the substitute terms, so it is a very familiar debate for media professionals. Personally, I do not think that the shift in terms has a lot to offer. I agree with Lichtenberg that most people know what the term 'objectivity' means and what they expect in terms of objective reporting and representation. Precisely because 'objectivity' is a fraught term that is bandied around in argument, it is worth comment and analysis. I have found in journalism studies and practice that it is preferable to grapple with the concept and practice of objectivity, rather than shift to another term, hoping that the shift itself will reposition the debate and somehow avoid the difficulties.

I believe it was Karl Popper, the famous empiricist and philosopher of science, who commented that what passes for objectivity in most instances is just the conventional wisdom of the day. Objectivity is an intellectual construct and it comprises two elements. They are a material reality, be it social, biological or physical and a methodology or perspective, a point of view from which you situate that reality and with which you try to construct meaning.

It is this latter part, the methodological element, which is extremely powerful in the construction of meaning. In journalism, we spend a huge amount of time suppressing the issue of methodology and ignoring its problems, pretending that the world is

transparently 'out there' and that all we are doing is representing it to inform the audience. In fact the most interesting issue in understanding reality, in objectivity, is the question of perspective, the question of methodology. It is also the most controversial. A number of museum professionals have called for transparency in authorship, in methodology and in point of view. They argue that, just as there are names attached to journalists' output, similarly there should be names attached to curatorial teams' output. The implications of this acknowledgement would be interesting and even controversial. A theme that has been very popular in Australian popular culture recently is the Australian backyard, the Australian domestic landscape, house, home, etc. This can be seen on television, with programs like *Burke's Backyard* and *The Block*, as well as in cultural institutions. There is a standard way of expressing and understanding these themes, whether they appear in museums or elsewhere that is based largely on an Anglo-Australian interpretation.

Australia posits itself as a successful multicultural society, although in recent years we have seen appeals from both major political parties towards racial prejudice in an attempt to garner support from certain sections of the electorate. Nonetheless there is still a strong strand in the Australian collective self-image that we 'live and let live'. So I think it is very interesting to consider how a Chinese Australian, whose background in this country could go back to the 1850s gold rushes or before, would perceive the Australian backyard. Would it be relevant to use the Chinese iconography of space to understand and represent the Australian suburban backyard? Another example would be to consider the consequences if there was a museum exhibition or a television program about the Australian landscape that was Japanese in its aesthetic perspective and

iconography. The Australian desert landscape in particular lends itself to a Japanese perspective on presences and absences, integration of the human presence and other themes in Japanese aesthetics.

If a national cultural institution projected an interpretation of the Australian landscape using Japanese iconography or Chinese aesthetics, we would expect a strong reaction from conservative groups and individuals. However the ancestral cultural heritage of Chinese and Japanese Australians is equally valid as a source of contemporary Australian culture as the Anglo or the Irish heritage. Any Australian who values ethnic and cultural diversity must give all immigrant cultures equal status in the heritage pantheon (leaving aside the question of their relationship to indigenous inheritances); whether your ancestors came from Shanghai or Manchester or Galway bestows no priority. So notionally a Chinese view of the Australian backyard has just as much relevance and validity as a Celtic-Australian suburban view, or an interpretation based on the English cottage garden.

To give the question a sharper edge, consider two sources of Australian immigration that have recently been in the news, Indonesia and Iraq. What if we appraised and interpreted the Australian suburban backyard using the structures of the Indonesian garden, for example if the curator of an exhibition was informed by Balinese spatial concepts of how the house sits within the garden. Or we could interpret an inner-city Victorian terrace house in Sydney or Melbourne, from the point of view of the vernacular architecture of Baghdad. There, over several millennia, the three storey courtyard house, with the garden inside the house, has been ideally developed to suit the urban climate of Mesopotamia, now Iraq. For Iraqi Australians at least, and perhaps for

people who live in the inner-city, that interpretation has just as much relevance, and at least as much interest and significance, as a heritage that comes from the cities and towns of snow-affected northern England. Perhaps the response would be even sharper if we curated an interpretation of Australian religious architecture, and the structures of socio-political relations implicit within it, from the perspective of the spatial iconography of Islam.

It is clear that methodologies and perspectives are not just idle debating points of view, they are not just biases or prejudices: they are material. They are about ways of being in and of the world, and of how people live their lives; they are about how people constitute themselves with respect to their landscape and their larger social context. Inevitably they are contentious, that is to say political. To embrace the concept of objectivity is not a way of resolving or avoiding difference and conflict; rather, it is to embrace diversity and disagreement, and inject rigour into the contestation that complements collaboration as an essential element of intellectual development.

## **Contestation**

I agree with Patrick Greene that it is a mistake to reduce everything to the political dimension. Life is much richer than politics, but one has to recognise that most objects, events and processes have a political aspect, that assumes significance in different places and different times, according to contemporary issues interests.

So how do we think about contestation? In media and journalism studies there is a well-known expression that the production of news is a 'site of struggle'. There is mainstream academic consensus that the production of news is a social process and that it

is inevitably a site of contestation. It is not possible to escape the contestation over what stories will make the front page or the evening news bulletin, or how the story will be told. No journalist ever thinks that they are outside politics: whether it is the politics of the local sports club, or national politics. They are never outside a contest to influence the terms in which an event or process is to be represented, and I would suggest that neither are museums. Because the production of museum programs and the production of research in museums are about producing meaning, and about producing interpretations of people's places in a wider context, they are inevitably a matter of contestation.

One of the fundamental elements of social history museums is a key struggle over what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. This is particularly important in the manufacture of any social identity, as Ernst Renan recognised back in 1870 in addressing the question of What is a Nation? Renan pointed out that one of the crucial ingredients in the formation of a social identity is what people agree to forget in order to come together. Museums are significant in that they are a strategic location in this battle.

Museums are like the media because, while they have a certain power and status, it is actually a deferred authority or a deferred status. This is because the primary authority sits outside the institution with the sources in both the news production process and the production of meaning about society and life in a museum. For journalists, authority rests with the people that you quote, the people that you interview, and the organisations that you go to. In a museum, the authority resides with the objects and the accredited sources; that is, the people who are accredited to describe, validate and interpret the object. While it is a common theme in media studies that of the purpose of most journalism is to query or attest to the truth of claims made, in fact the parallel,

underlying process in journalism is to validate the authority of the people who make those claims. By quoting the Prime Minister with authority every morning in the newspaper, part of what you are doing is validating the role and status of the Prime Minister.

The production of news is about the validation of what Ericson calls the 'authorised knowers' and Hall calls 'primary definers', the people who are authorised to know and speak about something. This is why the interpretation of objects in museums is so contentious: because an object itself may be many things, and the truth is multi-faceted. What is significant is who gets to give the primary definition, the primary interpretation of what that object is. And that is what the contest is about.

For example, compare two museum locations of representation about outback or rural Australia. Consider Longreach and the Stockman's Hall of Fame, with its rich and popular collection and exhibition program. It is clear that the objects in those exhibitions are authentic and legitimate, but it is also clear what view of Australian history exists within that institution and underpins its collection and public program policies. It is very clear why the objects have been chosen and who the authorised interpreters of those objects are, namely the past and present workers of the pastoral industries. There is certainly an Aboriginal presence in the Stockman's Hall of Fame, but the Aborigines are stockmen, and their relationship to the land and the outback as represented in that museum is the relationship of highly skilled stockmen employed in the cattle industry. The representation of Aboriginality and the pastoral industries in the larger Alice Springs area is different. The giving of the land back to the Aboriginal people has effectively removed most of the cattle from the southern part of the Northern Territory, so that

industry has largely disappeared in the Alice Springs area: there is no longer an abattoir in the Northern Territory south of Katherine. Most of the tourism in Alice Springs is oriented towards Aboriginality, for example the Desert Park, the thriving Aboriginal art industry, the artefacts, the museums as well as tours into the surrounding countryside. The people authorised to speak about Alice Springs for these tourists are Aboriginal people and their colleagues who are credentialed by them. The tourists who come to Alice Springs are not interested in the local stockmen's history, or in the pastoral heritage of Alice Springs. Those white people who were part of the pastoral industry or who identify with that strand of local heritage will reveal that they are unhappy that there is no tourist interest in their heritage. Their pastoral history in that area does not exist for visitors, except in relation to the degradation and suppression of Aboriginal culture. Although there is a similar social and natural environment in Longreach and Alice Springs, they feature graphically divergent interpretations of the outback environment and of Australian rural society. Those contrasting interpretations validate alternative social histories and their relevance to contemporary social issues. All this is mediated through the objects and 'authorised knowers' or 'primary sources' who are authorised to interpret them. Most importantly, the objects become a vehicle to credential certain types of people as the interpreters of the history and issues that are being celebrated.

The selection of objects and the accreditation of the authorised knowers, in parallel to the choice of news sources in journalism, are at the heart of this contest. We have seen a public instance of this contest recently in the Sydney media (ABC-TV Lateline 17/11/03 <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2003/s991146.htm>): the controversy over the curation of the 'Treasures of Palestine' exhibition at the Powerhouse

Museum. In this instance, the struggle was about what objects are to be shown, who determines what objects are shown, and who the authorised knowers of Palestinian heritage are.

A corollary of the nature of this struggle is that timing is very important. For whatever reasons, the Powerhouse Museum decided to consult the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies about the content and curation of this exhibition, however the timing could not have been worse from the point of view of the Powerhouse, coming as it did at the end of the intense media controversy about awarding the Sydney Peace Prize to Palestinian activist Dr Hanan Ashrawi. The media contextualized the Powerhouse story as a tail end to that larger Peace Prize conflict, which may or may not have been the case in the minds of the participants. The contest was waged on a symbolic terrain that disadvantaged the Powerhouse by portraying their position as another attempt to suppress and censor a Palestinian presence. This shows that struggles are not only waged, they are also ceaseless and timing is extremely important.

The struggle often takes place in a much larger context than the institution involved, and for any group to be effective in a struggle it is important to understand the larger context. Just as journalists in the media tend to think about conflict in terms of the organisational politics of what is happening at the newspaper or the politics of what is happening at the ABC, museums tend to have an organisational framework for thinking about these conflicts. The struggle, for example, being waged about the National Museum over the last few years is not only about the organisational outcome, namely what the exhibitions at the National Museum are to be. It is actually being played out on a much larger stage, and the Howard government is very happy for this struggle to

continue, because the contest shows that they are waging the 'good fight' on behalf of a targeted constituency most of whom have probably never been inside the National Museum. Nevertheless, the government is waging the fight on behalf of those people to make the museum into something which the government thinks those people would like. Museum professionals might see the conflict over Dawn Casey's tenure as Director of the National Museum (<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/natint/stories/s1003297.htm>) in terms of the desirability of a specific outcome, whether a certain person is at the helm of the National Museum or not. From the point of view of the government, the fight itself serves a strategic purpose in the short-term.

Similarly, when the Film and Censorship Board censors films, the government does not mind if there are pirate copies of those films shown in protest, for example the recent Ken Park film shown in Balmain (<http://www.smh.com.au/yoursay/2003/07/03/>). This protest gave the police a chance to go in and close it down, and when those people protested, the government stood firm in the face of dissent. It could be that the strategic point of the struggle from the government's perspective was the struggle itself, giving its constituency an opportunity to mobilise.

In the news media context, that is exactly what happened with the recent deporting of the asylum-seekers from Melville Island (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/11/14/1068674365255.html>). All the political players involved knew that the hasty regulations retrospectively excising Melville Island from the Australian immigration zone were likely to be disallowed by the Senate when it reconvened. As soon as they were, the Federal Government would have an opportunity to accuse the opposition parties of being soft on terrorism and soft on border control. This is

precisely what the government did say to the Labor Party and the Senate; it may well be that the government wanted the Labor Party to vote down that regulation so that they would have the chance to make these accusations.

The waging of this type of struggle takes place in a much larger context than just the museums or media, and is played out over time. The contestants are competing authorised knowers who exist in society at large outside the museum or media organisation. The object of the struggle is the hearts and minds of the constituencies that they identify as being significant to their power or to their status in society. The media or museums then constitute a site or a terrain for that struggle.

Museums, like the media, have to establish their own relationship with those social constituencies, establishing their own credibility and their own integrity, in order to maintain their legitimacy as a site for that struggle to continue. I applaud recent calls for a broader sense of interpretation and change as well as constant intellectual challenge. In terms of the constituencies for museums, I think one of the key battles that has been lost by museums is the income battle: the contest over where they are to source their income. There is a difference between the concept of citizenship, which is about a social and political set of ideas, and the concept of an entry fee for museums, which is an economic concept that constructs the museum visitor as a consumer. It is an economic concept that filters visitors in terms of capacity and willingness to pay and positions museums and galleries in a consumer marketplace instead of a citizenship forum. It pollutes and weakens the role of museums and all the evidence to date is that setting entry fees for museums, as Elaine Gurian has said, changes the way the institutions get dealt with by government, private sector sponsors and the public. Museums are no longer used

as resources, as people use libraries. Rather, they are treated as a day out, like going to the movies or a commercial theme park, which changes the demographics of the people who visit these institutions, as well as the way people interact once they are inside. To me that is a very important shift. There have been a number of references by other speakers at the 'Contest and Contemporary Society: Redefining Museums in the 21st Century' symposium to the potential role of private funding in liberating museums from the role of oversight by government, perhaps as a prophylactic to the sort of interventions we have seen at the National Museum. This is a debate which is very familiar in the literature about freedom of the press. It goes back to 1641 and Milton's *Aeropagitica* against Charles the First. The idea is, that you achieve freedom of the press by using private non-government funding in capitalist democracies.

What this approach completely fails to consider with respect to private organisations and public institutions, is the role of private economic power, both in terms of the power of private corporate sponsors over the activities of public sector institutions and also the economic power of individual consumers in deciding whether or not they will spend their money at a particular institution and for what purposes. I do not support full private funding, which is not to say that I support monolithic government institutions either. I think that the very concept of what the public sector is has become confused. We do not know what it is any more, just as the identity and role of public servants has shifted dramatically with the introduction of the Senior Executive Service without employment tenure, and widespread substitution of private consultants for public employment.

This confusion extends to how institutions like museums now relate to concepts of public service and I think this has very important ramifications for how museums define and construct their constituencies, and then how they relate to their constituencies in terms of their larger mission and social responsibilities. The issue of funding impacts on how museums are to relate to their sources of income (governments, sponsors and visitors) and is important in constituting their authority and legitimacy in the public realm. That is a fundamental battle which I believe needs to be fought at the level of individual institutions, which need to decide how they are going to constitute their relationships with their own constituencies. It is equally vital that this struggle be fought at a larger national policy level.