

# 'Journey without maps': unsettling curatorship in cross-cultural contexts<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Over the past twenty to thirty years, many art museums have sought to incorporate a more inclusive approach in the development and presentation of exhibitions. This has led to the adoption of more varied curatorial practices as institutions have increasingly acknowledged the perspectives of some of the differing cultures they claim to represent. As a result, many curators have been striving for greater plurality in the presentation of particular exhibitions. While there are various examples in museum literature of projects seeking to incorporate diversity, dialogue and difference there is less overt discussion of the disjunction between these ideals and their practical application. This paper seeks to draw attention to this disparity by examining the evolving curatorial philosophy and practices employed by the Queensland Art Gallery in mediating cultural exchange at the first three *Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art*. It will be argued that there is a need to rethink expectations of curatorial coherence and closure if pluralism is to be genuinely incorporated into the development and presentation of exhibitions. Although this can entail a loss of curatorial control, the inclusion of multiple voices and diverse perspectives can create edgy exhibitions which unsettle expected ways of seeing.

**Key words:** cross-cultural curatorship, art museum exhibition, pluralism, contemporary Asian art, Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art.

## Introduction

The new museology has played an important role in deconstructing many of the long-held assumptions underlying curatorship and museum practices by interrogating the museum's purpose, functions, power structures and relationships to audiences. Traditionally, most major Western art museums have positioned themselves as pre-eminent cultural institutions of the dominant culture, whose curatorial and collecting decisions, inclusions, exclusions and interpretations of objects on display, have constructed authoritative versions of art history and various practitioners' places within it. Over the past twenty to thirty years, however, critiques engendered by the new museology, as well as postcolonialism, feminism and postmodernism have influenced many art museums to adopt a more inclusive approach in the development and presentation of exhibitions. As a result, curators have frequently been striving for greater plurality in the presentation of exhibitions of work from differing cultures.

The Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) in Brisbane, Australia, sought to employ such a philosophy of inclusion when it formulated an ambitious plan to present a series of three major survey exhibitions of Asia-Pacific art commencing in 1993.<sup>2</sup> Rather than employing a single curatorial director to oversee the development of the initial *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT)*, QAG adopted a complex model of co-curatorship in an effort to encompass diverse perspectives from many of the countries involved. While the institution's efforts engendered substantial praise, the art museum also received considerable criticism for its curatorial practices and so it undertook a series of actions and revisions to improve processes. Despite these extensive efforts, after nine years QAG abandoned its elaborate structure of co-curatorship and subsequent *Triennials* have been developed by institutional staff. While several

factors contributed to this shift, the complexities, costs and fraught nature of cross-cultural curatorship affected the Gallery's decision to discontinue this procedure and to adopt a more controlled approach.

The case of QAG and the *Triennials* highlights the disjunction that can occur between curatorial ideals and their implementation in practice: an institution or group of curators might espouse a curatorial philosophy encompassing pluralism and inclusion but what does this entail when applied in the field? This paper seeks to draw attention to this disparity by examining the evolving curatorial philosophy and practices employed by QAG in mediating cultural exchange in first three *APTs*, held in 1993, 1996 and 1999. The critical discourse engendered by these exhibitions and the resulting revisions to the Gallery's practices in subsequent *Triennials* will also be considered in order to determine reasons why this strategy was ultimately superseded and to foreground the complexities involved in manifesting curatorial ideals in the field. The paper draws on the literature of museum studies and curatorship, QAG publications, interviews with staff and critical analysis of the *APTs*. In taking this approach it must be acknowledged that QAG staff will understandably seek to promote and defend their decisions. Nevertheless, in the case of the *Triennials* the institution made genuine efforts to reveal transparency in its processes and to recognize particular criticisms. Similarly, individual critical commentary itself is at times problematic as it may be informed by particular alignments or agendas. However, collectively it can provide useful insights into how the Gallery's curatorial processes were perceived within the art world.<sup>3</sup>

Curatorship as a practice typically involves structuring relationships and imposing organizational frameworks on works displayed within an exhibition. Various forms of classification include monographic, chronological, geographic, cultural, material or medium and thematic groupings. Yet while grouping works in particular ways may appear as a natural and objective form of sense-making, curatorial practice involves decision-making which can reflect underlying values and perspectives (Greenberg, Ferguson and Nairne 1996; Pearce 1995; Vergo 1989). Bennett (1995) and Duncan (1991) have both identified the roles that public art museums perform as powerful representatives of the state and its ideologies, capable of shaping and authorizing representations of various cultures for their audiences. Beyond this meta-level, curators play a more specific role in constructing meanings around works, including those from differing cultures.

In his examination of the structures and power relations that operate within the art world, Pierre Bourdieu (1993: chapters 2 and 3) has shown how curators in pre-eminent institutions wield considerable power in determining the legitimacy of some artists at the expense of others. As arbiters and gatekeepers of selections, omissions and the interpretation of works on display, curators play a significant role in establishing the status, value and classification of practitioners and their works. This capacity to control representation has influenced the presentation of art from differing cultures in Western art museums. Such presentations have traditionally been articulated in relation to the hegemony of Euro-American art, enabling 'some ways of knowing and not others' (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 5). However, since the latter decades of the twentieth century, the museum has acquired a more reflexive character. This has entailed a questioning of institutional and curatorial influence which has arisen through various domains, including the discourse of the new museology (see, for example, Bennett 1995; Clifford 1988; Lumley 1988; Greenberg *et al.* 1996; Karp and Levine 1991; Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Marstine 2006; Sherman and Rogoff 1994; Vergo 1989), and has raised the issue of who has the requisite authority and legitimacy to curate for whom.

Consequently, many art museums have sought to extend the space of power by incorporating diverse voices and perspectives in the presentation of cross-cultural exhibitions. These inclusive strategies potentially facilitate an increased presence and agency for artists who may have been marginalized or mis-represented in such institutions. In 1989, around the time that QAG was conceiving the *Triennial* project, a major international contemporary art exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, was presented in Paris. *Magiciens* sought to present a global perspective by assembling works from Western art centres alongside art from developing countries and cultural margins. The unifying theme guiding selections was the expression of 'spiritual value' (Martin 1989). The exhibition was significant for affirming a trans-cultural notion of contemporary art. At the same time, though, it collapsed cultural and political differences into

a presentation of 'pan-spirituality' and was criticized for cultural assumptions underpinning selection and display (see Araeen 1989; Buchloh and Martin 1989; Heartney 1989; Michaud 1989). Curator Jean-Hubert Martin's inclusivity was tempered by the fact that his selections were informed by his own cultural biases – 'according to my own history and my own sensibility' – and so avoided accommodating alternative aesthetics or curatorial perspectives (Buchloh and Martin 1989:153).

In presenting the *Triennials*, QAG wanted to draw greater attention to contemporary art practice from the Asia-Pacific region. The Gallery sought to go beyond the inclusivity of *Magiciens*, however, by incorporating a high level of cross-cultural consultation in curatorial processes – taking into account the differing perspectives of experts from the various countries involved in the project. Extending the sphere of curatorial power and control in this way, potentially enables participants to have a greater say in how they are represented and to use 'the opportunity to further their own agendas' (Khan 2000: 70). James Clifford (1997: 194) refers to museums operating in this manner as 'contact zones' where, although there might not be 'relations of equality ... processes of *mutual* exploitation and appropriation may be at work'. In such instances, the exhibition can function as a site in which cultural knowledge, political agendas and self-determined representations of identity can be brought to the fore (see Clifford 1988; Clifford 1997; Mesa-Bains 2006; Ramirez 1996). While these are valuable ideals to strive for, there is no simple formula as to how they might be applied in practice. Cross-cultural curatorship typically involves a collaboration between professionals with potentially diverse and diverging views but generally there is an assumption that the resulting 'product' will attain some form of overall coherence and unity. Yet if differing worldviews are incorporated in a curatorial project can democratic consensus genuinely be reached and if not, whose vision prevails? QAG was faced with these matters as it negotiated this difficult territory in its efforts to encompass plurality and democratic processes in the development of the *APTs*.

### **Conceiving a model of cross-cultural curatorship**

In the early 1990s, when QAG made a strategic but risky commitment to present three triennials and develop a collection of contemporary work from the Asia-Pacific region it seemed an unlikely candidate for such an undertaking. This was because its overall collection was patchy, its holdings of Asian and Pacific art were quite small and it had no dedicated curators overseeing either collection area. Nevertheless, the institution, which had undertaken a major revision of its collection policies in the late 1980s, saw an opportunity to develop a niche collection at a time when Australia's economic, political and cultural engagements with Asia were escalating. The Gallery's director, Doug Hall (1993: 6) referred to the *Triennial* endeavour as 'a project waiting to be done' because despite some institutional projects fostering interactions with artists in the region prior to the *First APT*, contemporary Asia-Pacific art was not prominent in Australian and other Western art museums at the time and most collections were primarily comprised of historical works. In focusing on contemporary Asia-Pacific art, the Gallery needed to take into account the fact that the region is geographically and culturally diverse and heterogeneous. QAG's Deputy Director, Caroline Turner (1993a: xiii), stressed that the notion of 'Asia Pacific' is a constructed one and 'does not refer to any perceived homogeneity among countries of the region'. This diversity engendered challenges for the Gallery as one of the immediate issues the institution faced in organizing the *First APT* was overcoming its limited knowledge of and connections with art practitioners in the region. Incorporating plural perspectives in the exhibition's development was one way that QAG could develop such expertise and networks. How though, could this approach be played out in practice?

Two earlier cross-cultural initiatives at QAG provided a guide to the sort of curatorial strategies that could be employed. In the late 1980s, the Gallery undertook an exhibition exchange with the Museum of Modern Art in Saitama Japan, for which curators from both institutions worked together to develop exhibitions of recent Japanese and Australian art respectively. In 1990, QAG also presented *Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences*, an exhibition exploring shared influences between indigenous and non-indigenous Australian artists. The project was developed by a curatorium which included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants. It involved collaborative procedures and was significant because of its consideration of Aboriginal perspectives and protocols in the exhibition's development. In both

projects there were differing views as to which artworks were most suitable for inclusion, so the curatorial processes involved extensive negotiation (Eather and Hall 1990; Turner 1991). In the case of *Balance*, in particular, these processes did not necessarily result in a cogent, unified presentation as the exhibition co-ordinators explained, noting that 'from a shared perspective, some of the works in this exhibition may seem difficult to comprehend, or seem aesthetically unpleasing, yet we must acknowledge that these works have relevance for particular communities' (Eather and Hall 1990: 11). Furthermore, some selected works were contentious for non-indigenous audiences while others were problematic from an indigenous perspective. Nevertheless the project, which was variously referred to by critics as 'revolutionary', 'puzzling' and 'the antithesis of a museum exhibition' was successful in genuinely incorporating multiple viewpoints (McDonald 1990: 79, Petelin 1990: 14).<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on these prior experiences, QAG employed a model of co-curatorship for the *APTs* which, although well-intentioned, became increasingly more complex and unwieldy with each of the initial three exhibitions in the series. For the *First APT*, curatorial decisions and directions were formulated by a five member National Advisory Committee (NAC) comprised of senior Gallery staff and external Australian members with expertise in cultural interactions with the region. The committee steered the philosophical development of the project and quite early on it determined not to impose a curatorial theme but rather to explore the diversity of work from the region along with 'concepts of identity, tradition and change' (Turner 1993b: 8). QAG's decision to include multiple perspectives and not a singular and Gallery-imposed view of the region's art meant that collaborative processes were integral to the project's development (Hall 1993). This was so that 'selections would also reflect what experts in those countries believed were important issues in the art of each country' (Turner 1993b: 8). There was also a sense that the Gallery's and indeed many Australians' lack of knowledge of contemporary art in the region necessitated input from experts who could provide both artistic and cultural insights into aspects of local art practice and differing ways of seeing. Deputy Director, Caroline Turner, highlighted the importance of an in-depth engagement with artists and curators from the Asia-Pacific sphere, remarking:

It is a long slow process to develop relationships which give us the experience to avoid obvious pitfalls in international exchange ... My own belief is that it will take 10 years for us to feel confident in these relationships and in our engagement with the art of the region (Turner 1991: 9).

With this in mind, the institution undertook two and a half years of curatorial development, with NAC members and QAG curators visiting participating countries and seeking input from local curators, artists and advisers. In addition, the project was envisaged as encompassing more than an exhibition, eventually including a related conference, publications, artist workshops and other associated activities in order to facilitate dialogue and debate about regional art practice. Nevertheless, QAG wished to maintain an 'intellectually coherent exhibition', so despite considerable effort devoted to consultative processes and 'significant input' from international experts, final choices rested with the institution (Turner 1991: 8).

The institution's capacity to undertake such an extensive and expensive project was enabled by funding from government and corporate sources, whose own aims and policies meant that they were favourably disposed towards supporting a significant exhibition of art from the region. Seed financing was provided by the Exhibitions Development Fund (EDF) which was comprised of contributions by several large Japanese corporations with business interests in Australia. Sizeable financial support came from the Queensland Government which saw the project as enhancing both the Gallery's and its own relationships with the region. A significant grant also came from the national arts funding body – the Australia Council – whose priorities had shifted to provide a greater allocation of funds to projects involving the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, a coalescing of interests between the artworld and political and economic arenas facilitated the production of this large-scale, multi-faceted event.

### Questions of curatorial transparency

When the *First APT* opened in September 1993, it was heralded as 'a major breakthrough in

Australia's hitherto patchy relationship with [contemporary] Asia-Pacific art' (Fenner 1993: 20). The monumental exhibition, which incorporated 200 works by seventy-six artists from twelve countries and Hong Kong, took up most of the Gallery's spaces.<sup>5</sup> Artists, writers and curators attended the opening celebrations and the scope, activity and 'freshness' of the exhibition and associated programs invested the opening days with 'sense of excitement' and dynamism, generating for many visitors 'a life and an energy that have not often been as palpable in the Gallery before' (Hoffie 1993a: 9). The exhibition was extremely well-attended and an internal report summarizing critical responses concluded that 'on balance, the opinions expressed in reviews are positive with a general consensus that the scale and contents of the project signalled initiative and marked an ambitious development in the presentation of contemporary art from the Asia-Pacific region' (King 1994: 1).

The consultative curatorial approach, the conference and the extensive participation of artists were seen by many as providing evidence of the 'genuine collaboration based on mutual respect' underpinning the project (Turner 1993b: 8). QAG's efforts were praised as 'exemplary of the best contributions contemporary museums in this country make to continuing cultural dialogue' (Ewington 1994: 12).<sup>6</sup>

Artist and commentator Pat Hoffie (1993a: 7) remarked that while state art museums 'tend to emphasize the value of art as an end product' and 'enshrine and legitimize these products', in the *APT* 'the process of the whole event remained as important as the exhibiting of the completed pieces'. It was this commitment to extensive curatorial process that has remained one of the significant aspects of the project, although this was an expensive and time-consuming procedure which Hall alluded to at the *First APT* when he claimed it was 'the most extensive, intellectually demanding project the Gallery has ever undertaken' (Hall 1993: 6).

Despite the many positive comments, the collaborative curatorial model also generated criticism, some of it centring on the degree of consultation and the lack of transparency about curatorial decisions. In making claims for a process of dialogue and inclusiveness, QAG was then faced with critical interrogation of its inclusions and exclusions to a degree that it might not have received had it simply engaged a prestigious individual curator to oversee the show. Although the Gallery provided an extensive list in the exhibition catalogue of who was involved in the selection process, little was revealed about how and why particular artists and works were included other than to indicate that selections explored the idea of diversity and notions of 'identity, tradition and change' (Turner 1993b: 8). As curator and critic Julie Ewington (1994: 12) observed: 'There was laudable evidence that wide expertise had been consulted, but there was also the sense, finally, that certain decisions would never be explained'.

The lack of information about the degree to which diverse perspectives had been incorporated, as well as the Gallery's ultimate control over inclusions and exclusions led some to claim that the project represented a kind of cultural colonization. Indian art historian and critic Geeta Kapur (quoted in Williamson 1993: 10) raised this matter at the *Triennial* conference when she 'admonished Australia for taking too paternalistic an approach to the region'. Hall (1993: 6) countered by asserting that the *APT* 'was seen not as an Asia-Australia dialogue but as a facilitator for debate and ideas ... undertaken on the basis of intellectual equality'. However, the lack of extensive information about curatorial rationales informing selections from each country left the institution open to such criticisms. Considerable contextual material was supplied by the Gallery because much of the work was unfamiliar to audiences. The provision of detailed curatorial statements, however, would have further assisted in contextualizing much of the work, mitigating against a lack of connectedness in the display and providing insights into the ways in which disparate perspectives had been incorporated within the exhibition. Perceptions of cultural colonization were fuelled by the extent of government funding, suggesting for some that the event was a thinly veiled manifestation of state and federal economic and trade imperatives. It appears, however, that while the *Triennial* complemented government policy, the Gallery had been instigating its own activities and policies in this area independent of such directives and was to undertake a selection process without Australian Government intervention (see Anderson 1993; Hoffie 1993b; Poshyananda 1993).

The practice of exhibition curatorship is a process of meaning-making and involves classifying, structuring and imposing some form of sense-making on the art chosen for display. The 'poetics and politics' of representation are integral to such processes. 'Poetics' apply to

presentation, display and exhibition strategies, while 'politics' refer to the underlying power relations and social conditions influencing ways in which exhibitions are developed, presented and interpreted (Weil 1990: 90). While selections may be made according to particular criteria, the organization of works within an exhibition space can further contribute to meanings communicated. At the *First APT*, a curatorial decision was made to connect the quite disparate works by organizing the display around national groupings. Although Turner (1993b: 8) acknowledged that this approach 'raises significant questions', QAG considered that grouping the work via country – through the catalogue, the selection process, and to a large extent through display – was a suitable strategy for this large, non-themed survey show aimed at a predominantly Australian audience with a limited knowledge of the region. Emphasis was given to educating visitors by providing maps and illustrated panels of didactic text addressing each of the countries exhibiting (QAG 1994a: 18). Nevertheless in structuring the works in this way, the curators risked oversimplifying and essentializing works as synecdoches of nation and these actions generated further critical commentary about inclusions, omissions, representation and agency (Chandler 2007).

The focus on representation by nation engendered a critical discussion centring on issues of inclusiveness, but this time focusing on the exclusions of countries rather than individual artists. QAG was admonished for the limited presence of art from the Pacific and its 'token representation of areas such as Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, Singapore and Vietnam', while there were further comments about the lack of inclusion of work from the Indian sub-continent, Burma, Sri Lanka and Taiwan (Smith 1993: 9; Ewington 1994). In addition, a confidential survey of event participants revealed concerns about 'the numbers allocated to each country'. Although participants' feedback was 'highly favourable ... some suggested more mingling of artists' work and a non national approach' (QAG 1994b: Appendix X). Hall (quoted in Clark and Elliot 1994: 31) claims that the selected countries were chosen for pragmatic reasons involving existing connections and logistical matters. Nevertheless, these criticisms highlight the problem of presenting an exhibition drawn from a 'constructed' geographical region and perpetuate perceptions that artists were selected as representatives of nation (see Chandler 2007).

In art museums, representation through display involves the identification of conceptual groupings and relationships, with clustering based on common features or difference from others (Hall 1997). Ivan Karp (1991) proposes that non-Western art has typically been represented through principles of 'assimilating' or 'exoticizing'. The former entails exhibiting artwork on the basis of a universal aesthetic and utilizing visual affinities as an organizing principle. However, this approach tends to overlook cultural specificities or relevant social and political contexts. In contrast, exhibition through difference highlights cultural particularities but risks exoticizing, essentializing and potentially detracting attention from the work through an abundance of contextual detail. As Marion Pastor Rocés (2000) observed at the *Third Triennial* conference, universal expositions such as the *APTs*, predicated on representation by nation, reflect 'the idea that people and things come from and somehow represent various societies, various nations, various cultures. This spectacle is about displaying all sorts of authenticities' and while more recently 'nation' has been supplanted by the term 'culture', both are harnessed 'to make a spectacle out of difference' (2000: 36). Dialogue emerging from the *Triennials* suggested that there was a need to move beyond this tendency to conflate artists and their work with their country of origin. At the same time, others argued that it was not enough to consider such art in terms of global art practice, or more specifically, a 'Euro-American paradigm', while ignoring local specificities (Turner 1993b; Poshyananda 1993; Rajah 1997). Pastor Rocés summarized the dilemma, observing that:

...while we are aware of our own practices within a global art infrastructure, and of the problematic conditions this implies, ... we are here to decentre the quite obvious marks of the great homogenous [and to] ... undertake the alarming and probably liberating steps towards viewing peoples on their own terms (1993: 47-8).

While there were no simple solutions as to how this ideal might be made manifest, the event at least brought these complex and difficult issues of representation to the fore. Pastor Rocés' (1993) call for artists to be viewed 'on their own terms', suggests a fundamental strategy for

cross-cultural representation, while Karp's binary distinction certainly presents a number of problems.<sup>7</sup> Assimilation, for example, implies that one cultural representation is absorbed or subsumed by the other, while the model leaves no room for the complexities of co-existing or multiple differences. It is difficult to apply it to cases of diasporic artists such as a Chinese-Malay-Australian practitioner, in the representation of identity as strategic or flexible, or in cross-cultural collaborations. QAG's exhibition *Balance 1990*, which included both indigenous Australian and non-indigenous work, had revealed that Aboriginal art and artists operate in many ways and with multiple voices: sometimes asserting a strategic, collective identity, often stressing Aboriginality but at other times electing not to do so. A presentation of diverse work from the Asia-Pacific region would ideally convey similar complexities. Consequently, thematic organization or groupings centring on cross-cultural relationships might have been a more effective means of conveying these ideas. In practical terms though, no matter how work is organized it is still subject to curatorial decision-making and classification and thus the issue remains as to what extent differing perspectives can be negotiated and incorporated.

### Control, risk and self-reflexivity in curatorial processes

The processes of consultation and shared curatorship undertaken for the initial *Triennial* were re-employed and expanded for the *Second APT* as the Gallery sought to respond to comments about selection criteria and reinforce its commitment to pluralism and democratic inclusiveness. The Gallery commissioned a report providing an analysis of Australian and international reviews of the event, and this was one of the means by which critical discourse stimulated by the *First Triennial* informed the development of the second exhibition (QAG 1994b). In addition, QAG expanded the National Advisory Committee and held national and international fora, each with over fifty participants who contributed additional perspectives to 'the intellectual framework and curatorial philosophy' for the 1996 exhibition (QAG 1996: 12). The selection of works for the *Second Triennial* was a complex affair, undertaken by fifteen teams comprised of forty-two Australian and international curators who selected 114 works by more than 100 artists. Although conscious of playing down notions that the event was based on national representation, Turner (1996: 11) noted that a 'country approach' for selections was employed for reasons of practicality. In a response to accusations at the previous event of Australian 'cultural imperialism', the Gallery invited Thai curator and art historian Apinan Poshyananda to chair the team identifying Australian works for inclusion.

The teams sought work by artists from Australia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand and Polynesia, Papua New Guinea and Melanesia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam since the geographical spread of the *Second Triennial* had been extended. Additional input was received from various advisors in individual countries but the power to designate final selections ultimately rested with the institution and its chosen Australian NAC members (Devenport 1996). The resulting exhibition was well received and demonstrated that momentum generated by the *First Triennial* had not dissipated by the second event. Overall attendances, at 120, 000, were almost double that of the *First APT*, while international visitors made up 13% of the total audience. National and international media coverage of the *Second Triennial* far exceeded that of previous Gallery exhibitions and the event also featured a strong contingent of participating artists who presented and performed at opening events (QAG 1997a; QAG 1997b).

In developing the *Second APT*, QAG sought to address some of the curatorial issues emanating from critical discourse engendered by the first exhibition in the series, including concerns about national groupings and the absence of a theme, apprehension about selection criteria and omissions of certain artists and nations. Curatorial philosophy and selection rationales were outlined in some detail in the *Second APT* exhibition catalogue (Turner and Devenport 1996). This document and the related international conference, Present Encounters, provided a forum for a continuing dialogue on issues generated from the *Triennials*, while also enabling the institution to respond to particular criticisms of curatorial processes and rationales. Turner, for example, asserted that, although accustomed to working on exhibitions with a defined thesis, such an approach was more problematic for the *Triennials* since the imposition of a theme on selections 'would imply we know everything about this art' (Turner quoted in Lancashire 1996: C7).

Representation by nation was also avoided in the second *Triennial* although the works were grouped and discussed under three loose geographical clusters: East Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and Pacific. Hall (1996: 9) claimed that 'nationhood and geography are neither the defining characteristics nor the key criteria for selection in the Triennial or the development of the collection'. Turner also responded to this issue, explaining:

If there is a contradiction in the selections for the Triennials, with an inevitable national focus, this we have tried to resolve by an emphasis on context and themes rather than nation and national identity. In the end it is the voice of the individual artist which is of fundamental significance and we place great importance on giving artists a major place in our conferences and education programs (Turner 1997: 68).

Through revisions such as these, both Hall and Turner demonstrated the institution's self-reflexive approach to the presentation of the *Triennial* series through a response to debates engendered by the earlier exhibition. QAG's evolving strategy in presenting art from different cultures through the *Triennials* thus involved research and consultation, action, and revision. Each event would entail a renewed cycle of negotiated processes and understandings, developed over time. Repeatedly, staff members asserted that the *APT* 'is a process as much as an exhibition', citing the shared curatorship and presence of artists as a complex but useful method of breaking down cultural assumptions (Turner 1997: 68). Reviewing the *Second APT*, American critic Connie Samaras (1996: 25) praised the Gallery's 'unique and self reflexive approach, which is quite different to that of the organisers of comparable mega events such as *Documenta*', and applauded the emphasis given to the presence of artists and critics which she saw as enabling the exchange of ideas. As Samaras suggests, this self-reflexivity and openness to dialogue was a courageous step on the part of the Gallery. This is because there is security in maintaining control whereas there is potential vulnerability and risk in revealing processes and procedures and incorporating diverging views.

Some of the practical difficulties involved in cross-cultural curatorship and the inclusion of differing perspectives were clearly articulated at the *Second APT* conference by Alison Carroll, Asialink Visual Arts Manager and NAC member. Carroll (1997: 42) described the tensions between contrasting attitudes such as the respect for authority and the status accorded to older artists in many Asian societies compared to the 'Western promotion of new, controversial, challenging and often young work', resulting in 'different cultural pressures' on particular curators. She emphasized the importance of the processes of negotiation and stressed the risk that QAG took by not opting for a more controlled curatorial model. Carroll remarked:

*APT* has asked a lot of individual curators to work together – and given them *carte blanche* on selection in principle – bearing in mind certain logistical constraints. Everyone has been treated equally, whether older or younger, more or less experienced. It's a new role really of individual freedom working in a consensual structure. The success of the show is the success of this process. Queensland Art Gallery took a big risk in this ... unlike the single artistic directors who carry so much [responsibility] at the Biennales ... whether Sydney or Venice or Kassel, and even Kwangju (Carroll 1997: 43).

Carroll's description underlines the complexities, risks and curatorial challenges that arise in incorporating differing viewpoints and balancing cultural sensitivities. Not only is there difficulty in reaching consensus but such an approach can also result in a presentation that lacks cohesion or unsettles the viewer since by its very nature pluralism suggests an inclusion of contradicting positions. Sally Butler (2003: 12) has argued that too often the 'curatorial incorporation of pluralism is not understood as multiplicity or balance so much as "neutrality", or perspectives that occupy a neutral or disinterested position'. However, an exhibition which intentionally incorporates differing stances will be inherently multifaceted and contradictory. In practical terms this can result in an exhibition which unsettles and disrupts the viewer. As Khan (2000: 71) suggests, 'the more collaborative the process is, the more of a compromise the product will be', sometimes resulting in 'a confusing cacophony'. If lack of cohesion is seen as a negative quality in exhibitions concerned with cultural interchanges, a curator or curatorium



is faced with the difficult question of whose cultural or aesthetic values should prevail. If, however, the curatorial aim is to juggle and juxtapose disparate perspectives and no single worldview is dominant, then it would be worthwhile to highlight these disruptions to audiences and challenge viewers to expand their expected ways of seeing.

Turner highlighted this point when she explained that the Gallery's commitment to incorporating varied viewpoints 'doesn't make for a neat show, but it has an edginess to it that is its strength' (Turner quoted in Lancashire 1996: C7). At the *Second APT*, the Campfire Group, a collective of primarily indigenous Australian artists, presented a provocative work entitled *All Stock Must Go!* (1996). This installation and performance emphasized a worldview which differed from the institution's, as the artists deliberately chose to position their work, both literally and metaphorically, outside the art museum. The installation included a cattle truck parked outside QAG's entrance, overflowing with items produced for the tourist market as well as paintings by acclaimed artists – all available for sale. It was concerned with the different spheres in which Aboriginal art circulates and the necessity of making various art forms for cultural and economic survival. In addition, the truck alluded to the displacement of indigenous Australians from traditional lands. In the context of this work, QAG represented 'the white man's keeping place, with its own code of entry which must, by virtue of the tradition it belongs to, be at variance with the cultural codes of those selected' (Neale 1996: 110). Despite these diverging 'cultural codes', both the artists and the institution mutually elected to engage with each other. The deliberate placement of the installation adjacent to, but outside, the Gallery suggested a desire by Aboriginal practitioners for both inclusion and degrees of self-determination in their intentional interactions with art museum practices. In a less disruptive collaboration, two self-determined groupings of Pacific peoples 'staked a claim' on QAG's dramatic Watermall and its surrounds in order to display individual works in conceptually connected arrangements. For the primarily Polynesian and Melanesian participants this space, with its long shallow pool of water, symbolized the Pacific Ocean, while the external grassy spaces nearby signified islands and functioned as a 'ritual ground' for performance works. In addition, the Watermall was imagined as a giant *waka* or ocean voyaging canoe and within this realm, the work of six female and five male New Zealand artists was conceived as two *waka* – one male and one female – bound together. Some indigenous Australian art was also incorporated into this conceptual landscape at the water's edge (see Neale 1996b: 56-7).

In ways such as this, QAG's curatorial model allowed for diverse input but this led to a sprawling and disparate presentation of work. Critics identified an absence of cohesion as a drawback in each of the first three *Triennials*, yet there was a dynamism, unexpectedness and 'edginess' in these exhibitions which engaged both art world and general audiences. Critical responses reflected both the benefits and drawbacks of this approach. Jun'ichi Shioda (1996: 17) commented that, although the Gallery and Australia's encounters with Asian art reflected Western perspectives, QAG had clearly paid 'scrupulous attention' through procedures such as the shared curatorship to establish 'democratic and equal relations'. John McDonald (1996: 14) remarked that the nature and scope of the project, including the selection procedures, suggested 'a recipe for disaster' but concluded the exhibition was 'anything but a failure'. For Masahiro Ushiroshoji (1997: 31), however, 'because of the large number of curators involved', the resulting display lacked coherence so that 'a strong, unified statement was not made', a situation further exacerbated by the absence of a significant linking theme. In employing a cross-cultural curatorial model for the *Triennials*, QAG was caught between presenting plural perspectives and the conventions of curatorial practice which demand intellectual underpinnings and a unified structuring thesis informing exhibition presentations. As it moved towards the third exhibition in the series, the Gallery needed to consider what curatorial approaches it would employ in future presentations of art from the region.

### Degrees of consultation

The principles underpinning the *Third APT*, which opened in September 1999, were similar to those informing the earlier *Triennials*, including the continuing commitment to co-curatorship and consultation. The number of participating countries was increased, and a new curatorial section, Crossing Borders, was added. This was introduced as a way of acknowledging artists

working cross-culturally and releasing notions of culture and identity from the constraints of physical geography and national borders. A theme, 'Beyond the Future', was also adopted but this was conceived more as 'a point of departure, a pivot for discussion rather than an (sic) universalist framing' (Devenport 1999: 25). It informed conference discussions and allowed for some interesting connections to be made within the exhibition relating to change, mobility and 'movements across time and space' (Devenport 1999: 25). However, the notion of geo-cultural grouping was, by this point, so closely associated with the event that the theme did not entirely mitigate this. In addition, by the time of the *Third Triennial*, the egalitarian ideals of co-curatorship, which the Gallery espoused as an innovative feature of the event, had become unbalanced in practice as forty-eight curators in five teams selected seventy-seven artists for the third exhibition in the series.<sup>8</sup>

When Rhana Devenport (1999: 25), Senior Triennial Project Officer, referred to the selection processes as 'a curatorial matrix', her term gave a sense of the complex, entangled web created by the institution in its efforts to demonstrate democratic and consultative decision-making. Where once critics were admonishing the institution for inadequate or incomplete consultation, by the time of the *Third APT* the Gallery was being chastised for taking these processes too far. In a caustic review, art critic Ben Genocchio (1999: 11), referred to the curator-intensive model as 'defying logic' and cited the case of Vietnam, for which four curators selected three artists, as 'a ludicrous situation', although QAG could provide an explanation for this decision.<sup>9</sup> The Gallery's repeated response to such claims was that the procedures facilitated respectful dialogue, allowing for more culturally diverse perspectives informing the selection of works, and avoiding a situation in which the institution dictated the terms of artistic engagement. Turner (1999: 22) defended the Gallery's principles of co-curatorship, arguing that 'the very factor some may have seen as a criticism of the Triennial model – that is the large interconnecting networks for selection and interpretation – has in fact been our strength', because it resulted in the integration of multiple viewpoints. Turner also stressed the value of the model as a means of training curators and providing increased knowledge of art practice in the region.<sup>10</sup>

The *Third APT*, like the earlier *Triennials* was a great success for the Gallery. The exhibition attracted almost 155,000 visitors and of those who were surveyed, 97% indicated they enjoyed the event while an even higher number agreed it was important that the Gallery exhibit contemporary art of the Asia-Pacific. The *Triennial* was acknowledged as a major cultural tourism attraction and received substantial national and international exposure (QAG 2000). Although the project had initially been a risky and unlikely enterprise for the institution to undertake, by 1999 its impact was clearly acknowledged. Commenting on its success, Turner remarked: 'In 1993 the Triennial could be described as a radical project, but by 1999 it had become part of Australia's cultural life, and is one of a growing number of projects in Australia which focus on contemporary Asian and Pacific art' (1999: 21). Much of the critical reception of the *Third APT* affirmed the significance and prominence of the *Triennial* series and its role in affording greater recognition of and discourse about contemporary art practice in the region both nationally and internationally (Green 1999; Jose 1999; McCulloch-Uehlin 1999).

Despite many positive responses from critics, there were others who stressed the problems QAG had created for itself by incorporating plural perspectives in selection processes and highlighting difference through presentation. Charles Green aptly summarized one such dilemma when he observed:

But in its third incarnation, it is apparent that the APT is being pulled in two different directions, resulting in a tension that usually manages to remain invisible in other, less ambitious exhibitions: the inclusion and celebration of microcultural difference sits increasingly uneasily with the critical interrogation and analysis, both by artists and critics, of the assumptions underlying definitions of that difference (1999: 81).

QAG was seeking to foreground Asia-Pacific art and at the same time make its own mark as an institution by celebrating various forms of difference but, as Green suggests, ironically its complex curatorial processes and shifts in classificatory structures left the Gallery far more open to criticism than if it had adopted a safer and more conventional curatorial model. Nevertheless,

the substantial discourse about difference which the *Triennial* series engendered was a positive outcome of the endeavour.

At the *Third APT* some commentators once again revisited the issue of curatorial control and the nature and extent of consultation (Genocchio 1999; Chiu 2000). At the heart of such critiques is the important issue of power relations affecting the selection of works and the questions of who should be authorized to curate in cross-cultural contexts – in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, who possesses the appropriate legitimacy to consecrate some works over others (Bourdieu 1993). There is no doubt that throughout the series all final curatorial decisions rested with the Gallery, yet it also appears that QAG made a concerted attempt to employ a difficult, complex and costly model in its efforts to extend some of that power to others. In addition, after every *Triennial* the institution sought to modify its practices in response to various criticisms so that their curatorship model was reflexive and responsive. Turner (1999: 21), alluding to some of the unknowns involved in cross-cultural curatorship, referred to the series as a 'journey without maps', arguing that when the Gallery embarked on the project it was a move into relatively unfamiliar territory, 'an exploration undertaken without preconception'. Turner's reference to a 'journey without maps' highlights not only the institution's limited knowledge of art practice in the region when it initiated the *Triennial* series, but also the difficult processes of negotiating cross-cultural curatorship and implementing curatorial ideals in practice.<sup>11</sup>

Although QAG's co-curatorship model was ideologically well-intentioned and achieved many positive outcomes, in practical terms it had evolved into a cumbersome, expensive and rather impractical selection procedure. When QAG presented *APT 2002*, QAG's Head of Asian Art Suhanya Raffel acknowledged that the elaborate model of co-curatorship could not be maintained as 'this generous reciprocal framework was bursting at the seams'. In addition, despite considerable corporate and government sponsorship, the *Triennials* had placed a large financial burden on the Gallery and the institution could not necessarily count on the same degree of economic assistance in future. By this time, there were 'curatorial positions dedicated to contemporary Asian and Pacific art' at QAG and the Gallery had built a substantial collection of Asia-Pacific art, so there was a sense that staff possessed the requisite expertise and legitimacy to curate the exhibition in-house (Raffel 2000: 8, 17).<sup>12</sup>

Consequently the sprawling survey model of previous *APTs* was replaced by a more consolidated display of work by a smaller number of artists, and the multiple curatorship approach was no longer adopted for *APT 2002* or the *Fifth APT* held in 2006. In employing this safer model, however, the qualities of dynamism, disruption and the unexpected which had arisen from the inclusion of diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives in previous exhibitions was less evident, as critic Stuart Koop lamented when he observed:

The best thing about the *APTs* in the past was the uneven terrain, the catholic choice, the festive and chaotic feel, in short, the real and actual engagement of the region according to many different terms of reference (2003: 31).

## Conclusion

This paper has shown how, in its presentation of the first three *APTs*, QAG sought to incorporate multiple voices and perspectives within its curatorial processes. It can also be seen that manifesting these ideals was a complex, lengthy and sometimes difficult task and that there is often a disparity between curatorial philosophies of pluralism and their implementation in practice. The curatorial processes employed for the early *APTs* involved a negotiation of differing points of view and these processes were integral to the development of the final exhibitions. However, despite the success of the *Triennials* and the Gallery's significant efforts in mediating cultural exchange, QAG repeatedly encountered criticism as a consequence of its decision to relinquish a degree of curatorial control for a more collaborative approach. As a result, the *APT* co-curatorship model was perceived by some as unwieldy, the classification of work by country was problematic and the early exhibitions were seen as lacking curatorial cohesion.

QAG's goal of employing genuinely democratic processes for the *Triennials* was clearly a difficult and sometimes problematic curatorial strategy to execute in practice, however, this

does not mean that it was an ineffectual approach. Curatorship in practice entails judgement and selection so, whether single or multiple curators are employed, this will always involve decisions concerning inclusions and omissions. Inevitably there were limits to the number of curators or experts from a restricted number of regions who were consulted for the *Triennials* and they in turn had the power to foreground some artists over others. Consequently, gate-keeping practices at whatever level would always be operating to some extent. However, the Gallery's decision to negotiate this thorny territory and its substantial investment in the consultation process represented a significant achievement. Issues of language, the underdevelopment of networks and lack of knowledge of art practice in the region were all factors constraining QAG staff when they embarked on the project. These were, however, elements that needed to be addressed over time and despite these drawbacks, selection activities and negotiations with international curators and artists were beneficial in the long term. They served as an important means of building understanding and cultural capital, provided valuable training, and enabled the institution to more effectively collect and exhibit work from the region on a continuing basis.

Pluralism inherently implies a recognition of contradicting positions which can mitigate against the curatorial unity or aesthetic balance characterizing most exhibitions, but at the same time the dissonance created can generate genuine dialogue about differing worldviews. If disruption is a curatorial aim, then it is important for curators to communicate and highlight diverging perspectives to audiences. While this may challenge some viewers, it also allows audiences to expand their expected ways of seeing. QAG's approaches in presenting the first three *Triennials* reveal that there are no clearly defined solutions in the practical implementation of cross-cultural curatorial initiatives, but the Gallery's model of research, consultation, action, and revision represented a genuine effort to incorporate multiple perspectives. QAG's actions also demonstrated that curatorial initiatives involving pluralism require the exhibiting institution to be self-reflexive and to place a high value on process. Although extensive collaboration may require considerable resources in the form of time, personnel and money, processes of negotiation and communication need to be integral to the development of the final exhibition. Through these entangled relations the museum can operate 'as not simply the stage upon which a single culture is presented for another, but where the relationship between the two is acted out' (McLoughlin 1999: 51). Although the institution still retains the final authority in exhibition practices, if it is willing to risk releasing a degree of control, to engage in collaborative practices and to reveal the processes behind the construction of an exhibition, there is greater opportunity for critical dialogue in the complex arena of cross-cultural representations, as this study of QAG's initiatives in this domain reveals. The Gallery's curatorial efforts in presenting the first three *APTs* can thus be considered as a 'journey without maps', but one which achieved significant outcomes.

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## Notes

- 1 This article primarily draws on published documents to investigate the curatorial voice and curatorial practice at QAG. This information has been complemented by interviews with past and present QAG staff and other relevant personnel. The latter strategy has provided valuable insights but has been tempered by an awareness that memory can be both selective and subjective, hence the emphasis given to published documents as evidence. While I have curatorial experience and was the foundation director of the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery, I am not, nor have not been, an employee of QAG and thus I seek to present a disinterested view of curatorial initiatives at the Gallery. Nevertheless, the co-operation of QAG staff was instrumental to this research so I would like to express my thanks to former QAG Director, Doug Hall and to Gallery staff for their support.
- 2 Although three triennials were initially envisaged, QAG subsequently presented several more. For various reasons the more recent *APTs* have not followed a strict three year sequence. The first three *Triennials* were held in 1993, 1996 and 1999, but the fourth *APT*

was presented in 2002 and the fifth was timed to coincide with the 2006 opening of the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art. This building and QAG now form a single two-site institution which constitutes the second largest public art museum in Australia. For ease of reading the institution will be referred to as 'QAG' rather than 'the QAG'. The term 'the Gallery', which is frequently used in Australia to mean 'art museum' will also be employed here.

- <sup>3</sup> This term derives from Arthur Danto's (1964) discussion of the non-exhibited properties of art.
- <sup>4</sup> Works by non-indigenous artists such as Imants Tillers and Tim Johnson, both of whom have employed/appropriated indigenous imagery for various reasons, were contentious inclusions. They were positioned near a display examining the unauthorized use of John Bulun Bulun's artwork for a commercial T-shirt design. Craft works and objects created for tourist markets were included at the request of indigenous groups because they reflected a connection with culture as well as a means of economic survival for many who had been displaced. Particular indigenous groups also requested the inclusion of a conventional watercolour landscape by Harold Thomas, the designer of the Aboriginal flag (Eather and Hall 1990). Further information about *Balance* was provided by Michael Eather in an interview with the author.
- <sup>5</sup> The selected countries were Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, The Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. India was originally included also but subsequently omitted due to logistics and lack of contacts.
- <sup>6</sup> Ewington was subsequently appointed Curator of Australian Art at QAG but was not employed by the institution at the time of writing this review.
- <sup>7</sup> Karp does not state that these are the only organizing principles but suggests that they are the predominant strategies utilized to 'produce the imagery of the "other"'.
- <sup>8</sup> This number can be compared to the *First* and *Second Triennials*, at which 15 and 38 curators respectively, were employed to nominate similar numbers of artists.
- <sup>9</sup> Turner's explanation of the Vietnam situation is that Australian selector Ian Howard who had developed significant local knowledge, 'could easily have selected the work single-handed, but he agreed to take a younger Australian curator in a mentoring role,' while Vietnamese co-curator Dang Thi Khuê, 'herself from the north, asked for another advisor to be included from the south, demonstrating the differences that still exist in Vietnam today' (Turner 2000: 20).
- <sup>10</sup> Turner pointed out that a large portion of the original Australia Council funding was specifically for this purpose. At the time of the *First Triennial* there already existed in Australia a number of people with expertise in specialized areas of contemporary Asian art practice, some of whom were included in QAG's various curatorial teams and some of whom were not. However, this does not mitigate against the need to increase and extend that knowledge.
- <sup>11</sup> The 'journey without maps' is an unintentionally ironic descriptor considering the frequent criticism of the series as overly focused on representation by nation, and hence governed by 'mapped' territories. With each subsequent *Triennial*, QAG made efforts to shift from this position to place greater emphasis on individual artists and notions of cultural fluidity.
- <sup>12</sup> At the end of 1997, QAG appointed Suhanya Raffel as inaugural Assistant Curator of Contemporary Asian Art, the only such position in Australia.

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