

THE AUSTRALIAN REGIONAL ART MUSEUM: A SITE OF COMMUNITY INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION

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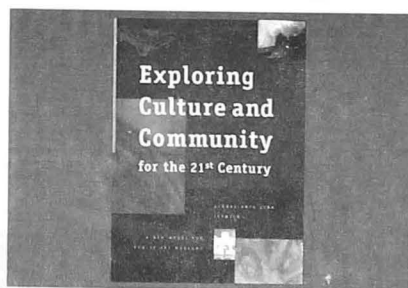
Abstract

The Australian Regional Art Gallery or Art Museum has been an abiding force in shaping the economic, cultural and social geography of regional and rural Australian communities since 1884. The history of this cultural institution and its present role as a *change agent* (bringing the local, national and international into dialogue and affecting difference) have contributed significantly to the building of united, sustainable communities. This paper explores this cultural institution (utilizing the case study of Ipswich Art Gallery previously known as Global Arts Link Ipswich) while contextualizing the gallery/museum's place in contemporary Australia. Its once exclusive *high art* focus has been replaced by an ability to engage in cultural tourism, local and national identity politics, and international diplomacy- strategies for growing the arts and culture in the regions of Australia.

(Ipswich is a regional city located 45 kilometers west of Brisbane the capital of the state of Queensland. Today this city has a population of in excess of 180000 residents.)

The Regional Art Museum emerged in nineteenth century Australia as an instrument of government and as a product of philanthropy. In twenty-first century Australia, this cultural institution's perceived parochialism and provinciality provides opportunities where both residents and visitors can dwell with the local and the global and create a particular place.

As the title of my paper infers or implies, the regional art gallery or art museum has, at times, to edge forward acknowledging even championing this institutions' parochial and provincial position. A fleeting road journey along Highway One – the national highway around this island continent provides





evidence of a country diverse in landscapes and a people, outside the metropolis, firmly committed to place. Along and adjacent to this highway over 150 public regional art galleries or museums provide particular services to their local communities.

Donald Kuspit, writing about regionalism in 1984, provides some understandings about art and regionalism that are relevant to our time: "The first is an attention to region as a literal place rather than a spiritual ideal or a psychic home, and secondly an assumption that a regional style is necessarily derivative – an 'inflection' – of a cosmopolitan style". (Bogle, in Timms and Christie 1988: 48) Region as a literal place has been played out by a myriad of Australian-based artists. The 1961 exhibition of contemporary art at London's Whitechapel Gallery curated by Bryan Robertson engaged an *antipodean* rhetoric. The bush, outback and an implied spirit of the land provided subject matter for artists such as Nolan, Drysdale and Boyd whose works were included in this exhibition.



Participants at Country Music Morning Tea, Ipswich, October 1997

The exotic circumstance of periphery, allowed Australia to be understood through this exhibition as 'other'. Also, it must be acknowledged that this mid-twentieth century exhibition like, for example, the *Perspecta* survey exhibitions of Australian art mounted by the Art Gallery of NSW during the 1980s and early 1990s, were provincial and parochial in their assumptions. In fact, in most Australian touring exhibitions, except for Indigenous visual art toured overseas, the clichés of land and place have been fully explored. This can possibly be explained by the fact that, until the early 1980s, artists and curators who were white and predominately Anglo European in sensibility produced all exported touring Australian exhibitions.

Bernard Smith's comments in 'The Myth of Isolation' a chapter in *The Antipodean Manifesto – Essays in Art and History*, (Smith 1976) insists that white Australia has always embraced the academic heritage of Western art. Since white settlement, visual artists have explored and exported 'Australianness' in many forms and ways. Aboriginal culture, grounded in a spiritual understanding of both place and peoples, could be

considered the only truly regional culture that produces objects that the West labels art.

Kuspit's second point about a regional style as an inflection of a cosmopolitan style is completely unfounded here. While Indigenous Australian art is indisputably geographical, its cosmopolitan values and style are informed by the art market and the seemingly unsatisfiable thirst for Australian Indigenous art on the international art scene. In this context, cosmopolitan centres - New York, Berlin and Paris - could see Australian Indigenous art, not only from another place, but also as regional and authentic.

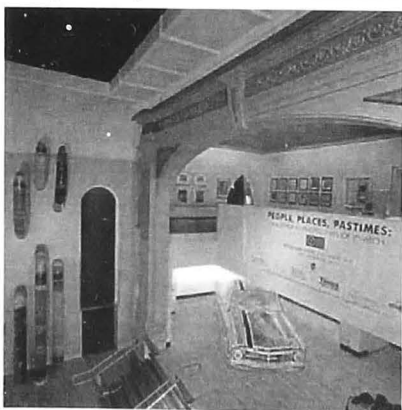
Since the onset of Modernism, globalisation and the local have coexisted. There are infinite examples in the early part of the twentieth century to support this statement. Walter Gropius's Bauhaus and the School at Ulm were regionally inspired. By this I imply that a cohort of individuals working together in close proximity and cohabiting the same physical environments produced ideas that were manifested into tangible designed objects. The circumstances

of Weimar Germany forced the Bauhaus to use the isolation of a regional German environment as an incubator. It was the economies of this 'form follows function' philosophy that infected the modern world, allowing Modernist design to take on a global remit.

Early twenty-first century globalisation, driven by new technologies and improved telecommunications poses even greater problems when regionalism is considered: As Boyle writing in 1988 states "When the centre is floating the regions may be seen as no longer so fixed in their isolated orbits." (49)

Australia's geographical location in relationship to the world has afforded it a form of cultural insularity. But since white settlement by imperial Britain, the filmic "dream factories" of the United States have had a significant influence on Australian cultural values and institutions. Rowe (in Bennett and Carter 2001: 46) argues "that in the field of cultural production, a forceful culturally nationalist current runs through institutional discourse". Turner (1994) supports this statement when he writes about a strong, confident and non-derivative national culture.

On the other hand Docker (1991) supports the position that local culture is conservative and staid without outside influence, "and that local audiences should be allowed to choose their cultural fare without the *patrician* imposition of edifying texts" (Rowe, in Bennett and Carter 2001: 46).



It has always been asserted (Rowe 1998) that the wealth of contemporary nations is dependent on free exchange of financial and cultural capital. Global changes are omnipresent. Lash and Urry (1994: 123) make a case that cultural industries (and Australian regional galleries collectively could be labelled a particular cultural industry sector) are not derivatives of major trends, but are models of contemporary economic exchange engaged in acquiring intellectual property rights.

The Australian regional gallery sector deals in intellectual property. Visual artists, supported by the 'public trust' inherent in contemporary museological practices, display their artworks in confidence. Many contemporary cultural commentators have alerted us to the increase in commercialisation of culture. Television, the music industry and sport are key players in commercialisation. Public art museums or galleries, including those labelled as regional, have been buffeted by consumer choice and are less and less supported by government subsidy and regulation. It has been suggested that commercialisation is often linked to the economic and political forces of globalisation. There is a tension in Australia, like most nations, between those who champion a national culture in all its regulated parochial forms and those who see globalisation as liberating. In the museum and art gallery sector, digitisation is the process that breaks down geographical borders,



allowing for the free trade of visual object/images to occur. The role of the state in protecting Australian culture is in question. Citizenship, cultural rights and responsibilities are being reconsidered. The regional art gallery, like other cultural institutions, survives in this new era of uncertainty.

Global Arts Link Ipswich, as a new model regional art museum blending social history with technology and the visual arts opened in 1999. This newly established art museum, located in the Old Ipswich Town Hall - a heritage listed building, became the impetus for and symbol of central business district renewal, and potential cultural tourism for central Ipswich and the Ipswich City Council.

In rural and regional Australia, expansionism has seen expression in a significant number of regional galleries either established or redeveloped during the 1990s. Throughout this decade, Cairns Regional Art Gallery in far north Queensland opened in 1995, Bendigo Art Gallery in rural Victoria reshaped its identity with new buildings and programs in 1997, and Ipswich Regional Art Gallery re-established itself in 1999

as Global Arts Link in Ipswich. All three galleries are pertinent examples of expansionism, cultural tourism and a cultural policy-driven pseudo renaissance of the regions.

The Keating Federal Australian government of the mid 1990s can be seen as a marker or signpost for change, where Australia started to see itself as an international nation and cultural exporter. *Creative Nation* was a true cultural policy that embraced the notion that culture is much broader than the arts, and that cultural activities can be positively valued. While culture is often considered as a “whole of life” concern for both individuals and nations, Rowe (2001:7) argues that culture is unevenly and unequally distributed across increasingly differentiated publics in Australia. The regional gallery and its public play out particular scenarios in relation to country Australia. In acknowledging Nigel Calder’s opinion that cities are more concerned with the past and that the great changes typically occur on the periphery (Calder cited in Trotter 2001: 338), regionalists in supporting this proposition, would suggest that, regional cultural development is much more than looking for inspiration in the bush or taking art to it.

Cultural development must occur in the regions as well as taking the regional culture to the cities. Since the early 1980s certain regional art galleries have acknowledged this position and have actioned their programs accordingly. Unfortunately, due to limited resources – personnel, physical

and financial – some galleries have not been in a financial position to curate exhibitions for tour. The Australia Council, Visions Australia and the private philanthropy of such organizations as - the Gordon Darling and Myer Foundations have provided the competitive grant schemes to develop and tour selected exhibitions from the regions to cities and beyond.

The regional gallery can also be read as a community educator making *the locals* aware of their ‘sense of place’ and position as significant contributors to the multiplicity of differences conflated under the rubric of Australian culture.

Since white settlement Australia has become a nation of urban dwellers. Since the late 1700s, the divide between the city and the country has been played out in the subject-matter of artworks, predominately paintings by white fine-artists where the landscape and the ‘squattocracy’ have been romanticised, creating a construct of Australia and its identity which is necessarily false. Australia is one of the most urbanised nations in the world, with over 80 per cent of its population living in city urban centres around the Australian coastline. The rural and regional have not only been mythologised, but also devalued.

The Queensland Government’s 2001 *Building Queensland’s Regions (BQR) Framework*, an innovative approach to regional development whereby regional, rural and remote communities worked in partnership with government to achieve growth through vibrant and sustainable

communities, had the capacity to extend them to their *full* potential and was a timely initiative.

The BQR strategy concentrated on strengthening the capacities of existing businesses by building business and community networks. This strategy implies an enhancement to the quality of life of regional communities by striking an optimal balance between economic progress, environmental responsibility and social equity (Fyffe 2001: 24).

Regional galleries such as Global Arts Link (GAL) renamed Ipswich Art Gallery in 2004, have benefited from the BQR strategy. This gallery has become a site where the local went global. In its first year of operations (May 1999 – May 2000) over 100,000 visited this museum. Building capacity and sustaining growth in visitor numbers and repeat visits is vitally important for any museum, especially those that are regionally based. Of these visitors, a large percentage of *locals* have support the museum and continue to attend exhibitions.

This community support and enthusiasm can be best understood by focusing on the art gallery's *Morning Teas* public program. Beginning in 1997, monthly themed morning teas have been scheduled on a regular basis. This audience-development exercise has allowed Ipswich Art Gallery to hear and record the stories of those living in and around Ipswich. Some of these stories have been incorporated into the *Time Machine* – an interactive exhibit located in the museums *Hall of Time* social history gallery.

Accessed through touch screen interactivity, this permanent exhibit contains over 300 hours of stories, themes and topics about Ipswich and Southeast Queensland.

This investment in those who live in a place, a town or region gives the regional gallery an endowment in place-making. The gallery, through its programs, exposes a palimpsest – layers of lived experiences vital to the identity and cultural capital of any community or region.

The cultural theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has argued that certain socially valued kinds of cultural consumption enact (and thus require) the consumers' "cultural capital". The nature of "cultural capital" is subject to debate, as Bennett, Emmison and Frow (in Bennett and Carter 2001) illustrate. Bourdieu, states that some people or groups are well endowed with "cultural capital" while others are lacking or differently endowed. This distinction of capacity may have its roots in class, education, power, income and (possible) geographical location. Within rural and regional Australia, similar to, yet different from, city and urban settings, the populace in the main is *probably* blithely unaware of the value of the arts.

A more considered way of exploring this difference is explained by Paul Kelly (1999) writing in *The Australian Newspaper*. Kelly supports the notion of "two different societies – a confident, educated, city-based middle class and a pessimistic, urban and rural battler constituency hostile to the 1990s change agenda" Shanahan

writing in the same issue refines Kelly's argument by *positing* affluence of the city dweller as opposed to the uncertainty of rural life in economic and futuristic terms.

Bennett, Emmison and Frow's 1999 study *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures*, informed by a nationwide survey of 2756 adult Australians, reinforced "the city-country" divide in relation to cultural pursuits and capacities. The study identified that people participate in a wide range of cultural activities with broad competencies across "high" and "low" culture. The *inclusionists* have a high correlation with high levels of education, with urbanity, youth and women. On the other hand the *restrictionists* are those people with limited levels of cultural participation "correlated with low levels of education, with rural and regional Australia, with age and with men rather than women and clearly exemplified in the manual working class" (Bennett, Emmison and Frow, in Bennett and Carter 2001: 195).

GAL was aware of these understandings in curating its inaugural (May to July 1999) exhibition entitled— *People, Place and Pastimes: Challenging Perspectives of Ipswich*. Mindful of a regional, outer metropolitan Brisbane demographic, with a high population of *restrictionists* this gallery believed its first exhibition, together with the museum's social history, popular culture, new technology, and visual arts blend, could attract locals and cultural tourists alike.

People, Places and Pastimes: played out a particular form

of regionalism as both a social construction of space and time, together with a particular set of conditions – that is, the history, circumstance and contemporary dynamic of the town and region of Ipswich. While Ipswich as a regional town, 45 kilometres west of Brisbane with a population of 135,000 residents, sits in the shadow of Brisbane, the imperative for GAL when it opened was to articulate, through its exhibitions and public programs structure, a particular sense of identity that is Ipswich. This imperative was driven by the art museum itself as a strategy, and supported by the Ipswich City Council as a way of legitimating the new art museum to Ipswich residents. This regional art gallery understood that the way to immediately connect with the population as a whole was not to just "talk-up" the new art museum, but to utilise the sub-themes of the exhibition - people and community, a sense of place, living culture, and the home gallery, - as tangible exhibition evidence of Ipswich's cultural and social wealth and its uniqueness. The exhibition acknowledged the working classes of Ipswich, the skills they mastered, and their traditions.

This exhibition, while focusing on the Anglo heritage which established Ipswich in the mid-nineteenth century, was keen to claim contemporary Ipswich as multicultural and constantly evolving cosmopolitan in its formative potential. A social construction of time and place was played out in this exhibition.

People, Places and Pastimes: Challenging Perspectives of Ipswich, valued place while exploring 'the state of mind' that was and is Ipswich. This exhibition together with the premise on which the art museum was founded simultaneously, embraced and interrogated the local and the global.

Global Arts Link Ipswich, as a name of a new art museum reinforced this strategy. This museum was keen, through its programming (exhibitions, audience development initiatives, public programming and IT web support) and by the implication of its name, to connect to the globe.

Using the museum's inaugural publication, an anthology of over forty essays entitled - *Exploring Culture and Community for the 21st Century*; *Global Arts Link Ipswich – A New Model for Public Art Museums*, regional values were explored,

evidencing new relationships between the economy of the local, the state and society. The regionalism found in both the idea and philosophy of GAL Ipswich, considered through the inaugural exhibition and explored with conviction in the publication can be understood as a form of what Castells 1999 labels as internal *regionalisation* - a systematic attribute of the information/global economy.

In 2009, the global and the local are very much alive at Ipswich Art Gallery. This provincial art gallery like many of its regional counterparts has edged forward claiming the local, its community and celebrating its uniqueness. Bennett, T. & Carter, D. 2001, *Culture in Australia: Policies, Publics and Programs*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

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