

Pleasing everybody – or not: museums and civic responsibility



Figure 1: Ian Wedde. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: DONNA MALANE

As a self-confessed semi-professional transient in the museum world, Ian Wedde reminds us of the need for honest questioning about museums' purpose, reflecting on his own early cross-cultural encounters in the Stephen Weil Memorial Lecture in Rotorua.

Cheryll Sotheran (2008) has suggested that enterprise and crisis (such as the world's current financial crisis) may generate opportunities for focused thought, and close, value-driven engagement with particular rather than mass-market conditions. Another kind of challenge has been provided by Michael Gondwe (2008) from Malawi. Looking for an ethical bottom-line in his museum's engagement with tourism, he asks a simple question: 'How does the museum use culture to stop people from dying?'

Keeping Cheryll's challenge and Michael's question in view, I will begin with some tourist stories that do not lay out clear propositions or come to obvious conclusions. But they contain information that more conventional openings do not.

OWNERSHIP OF CULTURE EXCHANGE

In 1969 and 1970 I spent some time in Jordan and Syria. These were times of conflict, as they still are in that region, and at an impressionable age I learned at close quarters how closely linked culture and politics could be. One example involved the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In the mornings on my way to work, I used to walk through a busy part of the souk in Amman to the central bus station. On the way I passed groups of men listening to radio broadcasts in the coffee shops. I found out that they were sometimes listening to broadcasts by Palestinian poets, including Mahmoud Darwish. The poems would soon begin to circulate in written form. These written versions were seldom provided by the poet, who was said to be under house arrest in Haifa at the time. They were provided by people who transcribed the poems from radio broadcasts. The status of these transcriptions – their authenticity, if you like – was not in question, though several variants might exist. What mattered was that they were in circulation, that they were discussed, that they were critical agents within the culture. What did not matter at this stage was whether they were officially mandated, managed, published, and authorised in some way. If anything, and in the spirit of the poet himself, it was important that these objects were not authorised, that the early morning coffee shop radio listeners had taken ownership of them and redistributed them freely in accordance with the wishes of the people who needed them.

Another important encounter for me around the same time was with a seller of carpets in the souk in Damascus. Here I learned at close quarters how closely linked culture and commerce could be. This man was a merchant who made a living for his extended family by selling carpets, many of which were sold to him in the first place by pilgrims making the hajj to Mecca. His fabulous shop was also a kind of museum: a museum of carpets, stories and pilgrimages. One after another, carpets would be thrown down in front of you, and out of clouds of dust the merchant would tell you where they came from, what were the contexts of their manufacture, what conflicts and triumphs they had been silent witnesses to – and even, sometimes, the stories of the haji who had passed through and traded them. Many of the carpets had crossed borders illegally in contravention of export bans on heritage treasures. This was also a museum of crime.

As well as being a trader, shopkeeper and possibly a smuggler, the merchant was also a distinguished scholar. What was normal in the context of the souk was that he spoke several languages: Arabic, Aramaic, French, Hebrew, and Pharsee as a matter of course, but also English, Italian and German. He could recite the classics of Arabic poetry at length by heart. What was only slightly less normal, was that the merchant was also one of Syria's most esteemed archaeologists. He added an ability to read texts in Greek and Latin to his linguistic span. Being an archaeologist and scholar of ancient sites throughout the wider region, he was also a tour guide and entrepreneur. He drove hard bargains as a merchant and organiser of site visits, but the satisfaction of his customers was secure.

Despite Syria's long history of scholarship, there was insufficient institutional infrastructure to support him as a scholar, but there was, and is, an old tradition of scholarship associated with his businesses. There was, specifically, no museum infrastructure in Syria capable of replicating the rich experience of hospitality, treasure, knowledge, and entertainment the visitor enjoyed while spending a day in the merchant's shop. Much of the entertainment came from listening to him talk about history and tell stories of indigent pilgrims as the cups of tea were replenished. Much of it also came from the bargaining over carpets and his offers of excursions to old Greek and Roman sites in the region. If no sale occurred, the merchant would express ritual disgust, but would then slip you a present and say how much he looked forward to seeing you next time.

ENCOUNTER AND CONTEXT

A cynic trained in the encounter strategies of museums and 'cultural tourism' alike might want to invoke Dean McCannell's usefully sceptical phrase 'staged authenticity' at this point (1999). However, though I am no longer as naive as I was in 1969, I would still insist that my encounters with the Syrian carpet merchant were candid about the key facts of the situation: I was a customer, he was a merchant, and yet a substantial part of the value in our transactions was social and involved exchanges of courtesies and knowledge as well as (though seldom) of money.

Also at an impressionable age I had an encounter with a great work of art – one of those encounters that make you go back again and again to art museums hoping the lightning will strike. This encounter took place in the wonderful Kunstmuseum in Basel, Switzerland. I walked into a small room and saw *Still Life with Oysters* (1940) by Henri Matisse. The painting seemed to extract most of my life force in a kind of outburst of astonishment and bliss, a gasp of consciousness, which it then poured back in. The effect was intensely emotional, but it was also extremely cerebral – it was one of the most complexly satisfying intellectual and emotional experiences I have ever had. The experience was an aesthetic one, but – and this 'but' does not imply something separate from aesthetics, which is the point I think – the painting also spoke clearly to me about how I thought life should be lived. It was sharp, alert, crisply beautiful, but also full of pleasure and sensory celebration. Ah, I exclaimed inwardly at the age of 22, this is exactly what life is about!

At the time I was visiting a friend who had gone to live in Rudolf Steiner's Goetheanum in nearby Dornach. I used to catch the tram with a feeling of dread, as if I was going to visit someone in a lunatic asylum. Of course the Steiner Institute was not a lunatic asylum, but it was a serious place of birchermüsli, carrot salad and special underwear. After each visit I fled back to the camping ground where my girlfriend and I were staying, and we would drink beer and eat sausages in the company of singing German tourists. Ah, I exclaimed, aloud this time, while singing with the Germans, this is what life is about!

Now, forty years later, I am still unable to separate my experience of Matisse's lovely painting from either the Goetheanum up the hill at Dornach, or from the beer and sausages down the hill in the camping ground. Nor can I think of the art museum itself as entirely separate from these places and their contrasting tastes and sounds. And whenever I see works by Henri Matisse, I have

become accustomed to being unable to separate either them or the art history in which they are embedded from the contest between the beer and sausages at the camp-ground barbeque and the birchermüsli up the hill at Dornach. These are wildly inappropriate baggages, perhaps – or perhaps not.

What do I now learn from this seemingly incompatible confluence of encounters? It is that museum experiences are never autonomous; that we are misguided at best and dishonest at worst if we claim (or expect) the authenticity of the museum encounter to be sealed off somehow from the circumstances, itineraries and narratives of our visit.

EMOTIONAL MEANING

In 2004 I spent some time in Bangladesh, where I hoped to find traces of my childhood with my family there in the 1950s. I did reawaken many emotional memories. Out of a sense of duty, as well as in the hope that it might be an emotionally tranquil place, I visited the National Museum in Dhaka. There I saw relics commemorating the Language Martyrs of 1952 and the War of Liberation in 1971. In a dusty vitrine, poorly lit and with a faded, hand-written cardboard label, was a torn shirt with bullet holes surrounded by faded brown bloodstains. To the astonishment of the polite Bangladeshi visitors who had joined me on my tour, I burst into tears at the sight of the shirt, which had belonged to one of the students shot while demonstrating for the retention of Bangla as the official language of his Bengali people. I do not know if my tears were caused by the poignancy of this exhibit, which did not seem like an exhibit at all, but like the forensic evidence of a crime scene; or the by the accumulated weeks of re-encountering the ghosts of my mother and father. What I do know is that it was the unexpected meeting with something of huge emotional significance to other people, but rationally not to me, that triggered what clearly seemed to my companions to be an inappropriate reaction. Though they were too polite to suggest it, my response to the shirt with its half-century old blood stains must have seemed deeply inauthentic; or at best to have been an example of staged authenticity.

What else did I learn? That however hard their interpreters try, museums are not places where rational encounters can be assumed or safeguarded. They are, rather, places where irrational, unpredictable, and even wildly inappropriate affects will occur; where the emotional meanings of encounters within the museum will be impossible to disentangle from conditions outside it; where a kind of transgenic exchange of alterity, back and forth between one other and an-other, is entirely plausible and even likely; where, for example, my old grief for my long dead parents could suddenly gush out in front of a dirty vitrine containing the bloodstained shirt of a Bangla language martyr.

RELAYED MEANING

In the early 1980s I spent a few weeks hitch hiking around the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand. I was researching the practices of Māori beach whalers in the early part of the twentieth century. I went to talk to Paora Delamere at the Whanau ā Apanui marae at Te Kaha. Paora was a Bishop of Ringatu, a vigorous old man. He told me some great stories, and then said that I must not on any account go and talk to Paddy Brown down the coast at Hick's Bay. Of course I went straight to Paddy Brown on the strength of this, and Paddy told me a whole lot more great stories. He then admonished me to avoid a certain other person a bit further along at Tolaga Bay, whom I immediately sought out ... and so it went, all the way around the coast.

The factual information I learned from each of them was not that different. What I learned was their community's ownership of the stories mattered more than the stories' veracity and the *hospitality* of each of these individuals was more important than their authority. What I also suspected was that they all knew their warnings not to go and talk to so-and-so were the best way to make sure I would do so. On their marae and in their homes I saw amazing things – objects, documents, photographs – and at Paddy's place a tin of dry, rendered whale blubber which he gave me a piece of to chew on. And then, at the end of the journey, under the eave of the museum on the other side of the cape at Gisborne, I saw the most beautiful boat ever built on the coast, a double-ended whale chaser, the *Greyhound*, which had been transported there when whaling stopped in the Bay of Plenty. Everyone I had listened to on the way there had talked about this boat. They all knew I would find it. It had gone to a place separate from all of them where all the stories about it, and all the contests for ownership of the stories, could safely converge.

We all have stories like these. Mine come into museums with me. They are inescapable components of the critical apparatus with which I experience museums. I demand that museums live up to the expectations created in me by the radio listener redistributors of Mahmoud Darwish's poems, by the scholar businessman in his shop of smuggled carpets, by the perfect art museum haplessly entangled in an unresolvable argument about how to live life to the fullest, by the emotional ambush in Bangladesh that called into question any glib categorisation of authenticity, by the competitive manaakitanga of the old whalers who all knew that I would eventually find their beloved *Greyhound* in a place where they could not argue about it any more.

THE CIVIC ROLE OF THE MUSEUM – SOME QUESTIONS

There is a more formal way of approaching the question of the museum's civic responsibility. In contrast to my stories, which have tended to endorse the museum as a place of paradox, anarchic participation, and unpredictable affect, this approach assumes that the museum is also a rational place where various kinds of responsibility are expected and enacted. I have in mind Stephen Weil's vision for museums that declare their respect for audiences by welcoming active participation. To this I add my belief that enjoyment can be critical, that a democracy of knowledge within culture is what active citizens require of their public institutions. Citizens who expect museums to provide them with opportunities for critical enjoyment will keep those institutions honest. Perhaps institutions that act in good faith to meet the expectations of participating citizens will, in turn, help to keep the state honest.

The question here is: *Can museums be safe places for debate in times of crisis?*

Museums hope to sustain a balance between commercial and cultural value: between revenue in, and enjoyment and knowledge out. Tourism hopes to transform cultural value (including landscape) into Gross Domestic Product (GDP). National identity programmes administered by the state hope to unify citizens and transform cultural value into political capital and international brand values. These agendas often conflict with each other. They often conflict with the wishes of local communities.

The questions here are: Can museums mediate these tensions? Is conflict mediation an appropriate role for museums? Where museums are the drivers of tourism agendas and where tourism agendas match those of state-supported national branding (for example, the 100% Pure New Zealand brand), alliances may form that are careless – or untruthful – about the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources.

The questions here are: Can museums establish useful critical positions within such alliances without jeopardising their funding bases, sponsors and marketing networks? For example, can they critique state-sponsored formations of national identity without alienating the government or local authority that may be their principal funder or indeed their employer? Can they tell the truth about agriculture's pollution of fresh water without angering the giant dairy company that may be one of their principal sponsors, for example? Can they afford to promote strategies of audience distribution outside the main centres without annoying the tourism advocates and marketers in those metropolitan centres? Can they afford to discuss poor water quality in areas where the main tourist attractions are lakes and rivers?

Big overarching question: What is the strategic task of museums in a time of crisis – for example the current global crisis whose symptom is climate change – not to mention the current financial crisis? Can museums address such issues while remaining attractive destinations?

These are serious questions and they tend to run across the strategic battle-lines within institutions. And this largely rhetorical exercise – asking theoretical strategic questions – tends to generate a number of oppositional models (such as commercial versus cultural) which the Syrian carpet merchant (and Cheryl Sotheran) would consider counterproductive.

EMBODIED QUESTIONS AND ACTOR NETWORKS

We can raise similar but less rhetorical questions by considering the natures and expectations of people who participate in museums – including museum professionals; others like myself who vacillate between being contract professionals and visitors; and non-professional audiences in all their diversity.

Museum professionals embody in themselves – in their natures and motivations – many of the questions asked above. For example, they embody the commercial driver of making a living and the cultural one of being expert in and passionate about the culture, objects, narratives, and knowledges that museums are custodians of.

They may well from time to time embody a tension between the commercial and the cultural, between making a living in museums and being passionate about what they do. But this tension will not be an irreconcilable conflict, or they would not be there. In fact, more often than not, their embodiment of commercial and cultural motives will be a productive one, in that they are making a living doing what they know and love. And they take this model of productive dialogue, and its rewards and satisfactions, into the museum, where they join their colleagues on a daily basis.

A complex collective of such people – the professional cultural body of the museum – *is*, in a sense that goes beyond metaphor, the museum itself. The dialogues and debates the collective embodies, not to mention its irrational and at times perverse behaviour, *are* the museum. In this professional collective, the museum embodies in various ways questions such as, 'Can museums contribute to democratic processes that keep the state honest?' This way of asking the question is more productive, and indeed more interesting, than the objectifying rhetoric of strategic questions asked at various removes from that collective body.

In the same way, it is more productive to think of the museum's collections as being part of that collective body, alive and integral to it, natured and narrativised, squabbled over and contested by diverse claimants, rather than archives of taxonomic conditions and uncontested truths.

CONTINUUM OF ENGAGEMENT

But of course, the museum is not *just* the collective of those who work there. The natures and motivations of those who participate in museums include the natures and motivations of semi-professional contractors like me, who are both in and out of museums, not as committed professionally, but probably more engaged in other ways than the professionals are in their daily work. I will come in less often, I may come in a bit fresher, with my expectations, curiosity, and sometimes scepticism, more focused on what I am going to experience, than on what tasks I am going to do.

But semi-professional contractors are not separate from the museum professionals who come in every day to do work. They are joined at the hip, and the ways in which the semi-professionals might embody the strategic questions I have been asking will differ only in nuance and degree, along a stretch between museum professionals and museum audiences. What occasional contractors bring to museums is not the nature and motivation – call it the consciousness – of being inside most of the time, with an inward focus, but the consciousness of transients who are also outside much of the time, who may tend to mash-up distinctions between inside and outside.

Nor, of course, are the museum's diverse audiences that come in only occasionally separate either from the semi-professional transient who comes and goes regularly, or from the museum professional who is in the museum most of the time. All are parts of the complex collective body or 'actor network' of the museum, which will also, therefore, incorporate their different kinds of relationships to the collections – relationships that are not distinct or separate, but linked: the relationship of the museum kaitiaki or curator to the collections, that of the semi-regular researcher or contract curator, that of the occasionally visiting member of the public. All linked and all capable of being unpredictable and irrational.

IN PRAISE OF PRODUCTIVE IMBALANCE

Along the stretch from professionals mostly inside the museum to the audience mostly outside it – along this continuum of the museum body – the strategic questions being considered here will generate a continuum of answers and varieties of dialogue. It is probably fair to say that that part of the museum's collective body characterised as professional and predominantly within the museum on a regular basis, will tend to produce inwardly directed responses to those questions. The strategies that arise from them asking the questions will tend produce solutions internal to the museum's requirements.

Cultural and social anthropologists, as well as their close relatives – the management and systems theorists – know that over time settled institutional cultures become resistant to change. Their social structures, practices and language become codified. Clear demarcations are established between those who are encompassed by and privy to the codes and those who are not. There are insiders and outsiders. There is a theologising of what were once fresh, new ideas – they become dogma.

In such an established and settled museum culture, the internal part of the museum's collective body tends to perceive the audience part of that body as existing *only when it is also inside the museum* – or perhaps, in terms of marketing, when it is *potentially* inside the museum. Archaeologists and archaeo-historians discuss this kind of settlement consolidation process in terms of human societies and how they do, or do not, change and develop. They tell us that settled societies with well regulated codes and impermeable cultural frontiers have great difficulty changing and adapting, whereas societies whose ecologies, cultures and economies are diverse and mobile, which are subject to 'imbalances productive of change', to use Fernand Braudel's wonderfully pithy term, are going to be more resilient, innovative and able to live with, and make something of, difference.

In this context, I see my variously irrational and inappropriate responses to museum encounters, my transgenic exchanges of alterity between one other and an-other, as contributing to the health of the museum as a collective consciousness constantly washed in and out of by the anarchic tides of the world 'outside' where, as Michael Gondwe reminded us, people are dying. There are many examples of deliberate strategies for producing 'imbalances productive of change' that work to keep the museum open to the world. With these, I will try to come to some conclusions.

First, an example of how an inward-looking, settled, frontier-secured museum paradigm might rather be exploited and subverted. The veteran Paraguayan curator Ticio Escobár persisted for many years in his work with indigenous and contemporary art in the face of political repression. Escobár's curatorial projects include the *2007 Bienale de Valencia*, which had the wonderful Escobarian subtitle, *Other Versions of the Contemporary: The Trials of Living Together*. In 2006, the Paraguayan Government enacted the Escobár Law (drafted by Ticio) for the protection of Indigenous Arts and Heritage in Paraguay – non-existent up until then, but the result, in large part, of his strategic activism. His Museo del Barro (Museum of Mud) in Asunción preserves Paraguayan

vernacular culture, which he sees as an inalienable expression of resistance. His Indigenous Art Museum is one aspect of his support for indigenous land rights. He deliberately exhibits both vernacular and indigenous art in close contact with prestigious international contemporary art, and does so in metropolitan contexts. In doing this, Escobár is publically denying that popular and indigenous cultures are marginal.

The South African artist and curator Khwezi Gule proposed an opposite but equally subversive strategy in thinking about *Cape 2006*, the pan-African contemporary biennale project. He looked at infrastructure and movement in the Cape, for example the ways in which public transport, especially rail transport, separated the townships from each other by routing transport through a metropolitan terminus. The directions of infrastructure had been, and continued to be determined by the movements of labour from the townships to the city terminus and back to the townships. These flows in effect kept the townships apart as disconnected satellites of a hub. His question was, 'How could these infrastructural flows be rearticulated so that a pan-African biennale *linked* townships and empowered their audiences?' He saw the key strategic issue for the biennale as movement and dispersal rather than metropolitan convergence. The key questions were not about which artists to select from the international biennale carousel, but rather who could get where, how could townships connect away from the terminus, what audiences were disenfranchised by distance and infrastructure, which artists were rendered peripheral by the capital flows of international art as these replicated the metropolitanising infrastructural shape of the Cape's rail system on a global scale; which 'art turkeys', as he called them, needed to fly back against those flows in order to participate in Africa, how did funding move around?

In France, the Centres d'Action Culturelle established after the Second World War through the vision of André Malraux and developed by Jack Lang through successive Socialist administrations are a model of state-sponsored cultural devolution. The national and regional funds for collecting contemporary art, and the distribution of

the national collections through an enormous variety of venues throughout regional France, are heavily bureaucratised. But the distributed infrastructure and culture they have grown over the course of half a century will not be dismantled easily by Nicolas Sarkozy. They are now integral to how people live their lives, to the regionalisation of national heritage, the celebration of regional genius and distinction.

Here we have three models of intervention in the museum as a collective public consciousness rather than an hermetic archive: firstly, the deliberate and provocative metropolitanising of politically marginalised cultures; secondly, rethinking what would conventionally have been a metropolitan biennale in terms of the ability of disenfranchised participants to move and connect away from the centre; thirdly, the socialised, state-sponsored devolution of cultural opportunity and participation. What we also have, in the form of museum encounter stories such as those with which I began this talk, is evidence that museums make meaning as much in spite of as because of their rational, organising systems; and that they may be greatly enriched by these subversions if they admit them.

What my stories no less than these strategic case studies are telling us is that museums as complex collective bodies can be agents of radical social change and critical consciousness; that we will find evidence of their agency *inside* museums; but we will also find it coming and going from museums, and sometimes, paradoxically, we will find the museum's most significant agents of change somewhere else entirely.

Ian Wedde was born in 1946 in Blenheim, New Zealand, and has been a compulsive museum visitor since childhood. His two books of essays, *How to be Nowhere* (1995) and *Making Ends Meet* (2005) contain records of his critical work with museums and as an art critic and curator. Between 1994 and 2004 he was a member of the conceptual team at Te Papa Tongarewa. His novel *The Viewing Platform* (2006) was a satire of 'official culture'. His book on the artist Bill Culbert, *Bill Culbert: Making Light Work*, was published in August 2009.

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