

Australian Cultural Identity and support of Pluralism in the Visual Art Industry

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Abstract. Postmodern theorists brought attention to the importance of understanding mechanisms by which a dominant culture maintains control of the power base. Australia pays attention to its British Colonial heritage that acts as a coded discourse heavily influencing the present-day power base. Using the Visual Arts Industry, this paper examines issues of power in relation to the establishment of equitable representation for minority groups of differing ethnicity within the Australian Western hegemony. Government arts policies, enacted at regional, state and federal levels will be discussed with regard to the effect the policies have on collection, acquisition, exhibition and publication of art, in turn, affecting levels to which galleries participate in the multicultural dialogue. External factors also effect participation levels and will be discussed with regard to conditions imported from both country origin and Australia. As a culturally specific form of communication, the visual arts can provide a forum within which groups can negotiate the power balance. It is therefore important that minority groups be enabled to achieve an active voice in the negotiation. With a better understanding of cultural visual dialogues, improved strategies to support and sustain multiculturalism can facilitate the process and the right to civic pluralism is better served.

Keywords: Post-modern theory; cultural equity, visual art, visual dialogue, Australian Government Engagement, Queensland Art Gallery, Risk aversion, decontextualization.

1. Introduction

Post-modern theory argues that any hegemony comes under scrutiny for its mechanisms that prevent minorities from attaining equitable status. This paper discusses the means by which cultural representation of minority groups might be inhibited within the Australian visual arts industry. Kress and van Leeuwen state that 'Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction' [1]. This finding assists in the provision of a concrete medium to explicate the mechanisms by which the dominant Western culture maintains control of visual dialogues in Australia.

Australian institutional practices and governance systems are based on the British and North American models. In 1973 Australia enacted legislation, declaring commitment to equality of all members of Australian society, in particular with respect to the maintenance of cultural traditions of immigrants, subject to the law [2].

Recognition and discussion of factors such as self-limiting mechanisms brought from the culture of origin, the role of language and fiscal imperative assists understanding from a social perspective. Examination of factors that either limit or facilitate participation and representation within Government galleries at regional, state, and federal levels, will give insight into the institutional environment. Areas such as management systems, philosophies and policies of the galleries, can provide a structure to discuss the level of commitment to equity of representation in contemporary visual arts in Australia.

2. Government Engagement

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Adlington states that many galleries have expanded planning infrastructure but are unable to sustain an active collection policy because there was no corresponding funding growth, as well as 'increased competition for finite fiscal resources' [3]. This is even before considering content or philosophy to direct their collections. Local interests (understood as cultural demographics), influence the direction and allocation of available monies for local and regional galleries, to service and expand their collection and outreach programs.

The Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Brisbane opened in 2006. It strategically expanded Queensland Art Gallery's (QAG) collection of Contemporary International art. The Asia Pacific collection is the most significant in Australia, in part due to GoMA hosting the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. Australian Centre of Asia-Pacific Art (ACAPA), as an ancillary organization to GoMA, was created to form alliances, promote knowledge and learning, and to advance research. It also administers an acquisition program with the intention of creating a globally recognized collection of art from the Asia-Pacific region [8].

This strategic planning and support for multiculturalism in the arts highlights GOMA as a unique institution in Australia, adding significantly to the implementation of the governments pledge to a multicultural dialogue.

In 1994, Australia published its first national cultural policy, recognizing 'culture' as an industry creating 13 billion dollars in annual revenue, employing around 336,000 people [4]. In addition, Craik et al. assert that the Australia government is increasing infrastructure to support cultural and lifestyle concerns along with traditional art forms [5]. They argue that in a climate of internationalization, state governments maintain considerable control over policy decisions placing increasing importance on the provision of cultural infrastructure [5]. Craik et al. also state that 'the drive to re-badge arts and culture as "cultural industries" suggests a need to justify public expenditure on the grounds of economic contribution' [5]. Australian adherence to economic rationalist principles requires art institutional expenditure to be rationalized against their fiscal allocation. The temptation may be to skew the exhibitions toward major audiences to meet fiscal requirements or visitor number targets, according to the criterion of success. Thus, economic rationalism perpetuates the dominant discourse. Another power mechanism exists in the public/consumer/audience base. If attendance numbers are low for any given exhibition then in the future similar content exhibitions are highly unlikely. The National Gallery of Victoria is widely recognised for 'block buster' exhibitions, which are rarely contemporary works and even less likely to be of anything other than European origins.

These statements acknowledge fiscal considerations as a driving force in contemporary art organization and practice.

Apart from Government engagement, there are other factors to consider with regard to establishing equitable conditions within the arts industries in Australia.

3. Risk and Imperative

There are self-imposed limiting mechanisms occurring even before the question of 'talent' becomes an issue in considering art as a viable occupation. The perception of art is of a high-risk profession. This considered within the Australian capitalist economic system, creates ramifications that require acknowledgement.

Risk aversion and economic imperative are very strong dissuading arguments for all people living in a capitalist economy. Many immigrants do not have a solid economic base upon arrival in a new country and therefore must address economic imperative. It is for this reason that children of immigrants are more likely to be encouraged into applied professions such as Law, Accounting, or Medicine. Applied occupations have a greater probability of financial security and less risk of unemployment. The same economic imperative factors may apply to Australians occupying lower socio-economic status, although this demographic has the possibility of access to better support systems than their immigrant peers, through being part of the hegemonic cultural (power) structure.

Risk aversion [7] also acts as a deterrent to the up take of art practice as a profession. When risk is evaluated using talent and the probability of fiscal success as criteria, a career in the art industry would be perceived as a high-risk scenario. Therefore, given the imperative to earn money and perceived high risk

factor, immigrants are less likely to participate as emerging or professional contemporary artists in the arts industry within the Australian economy.

The question then arises as to how the Australian government can further assist immigrants to overcome these economic deterrents. As well as risk and imperative factors, it is also necessary investigate terminology and the existing cultural system for factors limiting or preventing parity.

4. Language

External to art production but effecting cost/remuneration and consumption of art products is the 'terminology' ascribed to the products. Ideological descriptive nomenclature affects commodity price of art objects. Terms such as 'artefact', 'craft', and 'ethnic' carry pejorative connotations as used by a culture that elevates a Western historically based definition of 'fine art' originating from the historical positioning of cultural studies.

Historically, in Australia, investigation and collection of Southeast Asian art, was directed through disciplines such as, anthropology, archaeology and history, and 'concentrated on religious monuments and statuary' [9]. This taxonomic system emphasizes Western museological practice. Pieces were collected and placed in the 'rarefied' atmosphere of museums or galleries. This obfuscates the original purpose and meaning through decontextualization. By Western definition, they become artefacts. Other examples are words such as pottery, ceramics, and porcelain. Each term has a very specific definition but all are reduced to artefacts without their own specific cultural hierarchical meaning. Janet Klopas states that craft works 'put such a premium on aspects of surface that form might almost be considered merely a convenience, a support for or enabler of surface' [10]. The Japanese, in designing Kimonos, pay such attention to the decorative surface design qualities that if measured by Klopas's statement, Kimonos would be labelled craft piece despite the fact that Japanese people value many kimonos as fine works of art. An equivalent example in Western culture is *haut couture*. This is exclusive custom-fitted clothing made to order for a specific customer. It is, by definition, crafted from exclusive fabric, with great consideration to detail and finish, using time-consuming, hand-executed techniques. This does not distinguish the pieces from their Japanese counterparts. It is the rules and legal requirements set to qualify Western designers manufacturing *haut couture* that separate them from Japanese Kimono designers. These rules ensure a commercial business enterprise as opposed to the very strong traditions that bind Japanese kimono designers.

These examples serve to exemplify the ongoing debate in Western culture regarding ideologically biased language as well as underlining the destabilizing effect that decontextualization has on any given piece. Understanding this principle further accentuates the need to be very aware of terminology that may promote inequity.

5. Post-modern Legitimation Crisis with regard to Fiscal Considerations in Visual Art Practice

What makes art different from other sorts of commodity is that it comes to us in its specificity, and not simply by type, [but] as already mediated. A given work is already known in certain respects by its reputation, or by our foreknowledge of how to attend to the institutions that bring the aesthetic into view—broadcast networks, publishing houses, museums, Hollywood, schools, advertising, and the like [11].

Martin's statement provides an example of what post-modern theory made explicit, regarding the problem of reinforcement and promotion of the dominant philosophy that directs the art industry through self-legitimation. Unit price in art is not measured by the standard modelling paradigm applied to economic processes. Factors such as rarity and desirability/fashion influence pricing thus making the pricing structure subjective. This is salient to the discussion of art produced for consumption in the Australian model of economic rationalism because the basic incentives of the demand and supply model drive artists to produce work predominantly aimed at the mainstream aesthetic. Conversely, a product with culturally specific aesthetics produced for a small consumer base, is less likely to be financially viable. The implication of this is that minority culture art and aesthetic is less likely to continue to reflect the traditional archetypal cultural expression because of economic imperative. While many art pieces are unique and the unit price arbitrary, it

is viable to say that statistically the larger the potential market place, the more likely art, as a commodity, is to sell. Martin argues that

... the consumption of art does not, like a hamburger, make it disappear. The consumption—or reception—of art also makes and yields a proliferation of cultural effects [11].

One such example is the reception of some aspects of Eastern philosophy by Australians, which then promoted the proliferation of other Asian influences in spheres such as interior design or fashion.

Proliferation can support the economic viability of minority aesthetic, by accentuating marginalized products. An example of this is the current phenomenon of using Buddha heads to decorate Western houses and gardens. Martin makes comment on the use of the symbolic to create a critical arena in which to examine cultural differences and similarities. Kress and van Leeuwen state that ‘... signs are never arbitrary, and “motivation” should be formulated in relation to the sign-maker and the context in which the sign is produced...’[1]. This underlines several points made previously as well as making obvious the function of dialogue in visual communications. The use of cultural signs or iconography forms an oppositional or contrasting scenario, which promotes critical discourse. In this particular scenario, while the sign has gained acceptance and proliferated, the consumption and dislocation of the sign/icon has also devalued and subjugated the sign through dislocation.

This provides us with a very current example of the necessity to be aware that human experience is subjective and that without the acknowledgement of such, inequity and subjugation may occur. Having stated that, the use of cultural signs and iconography is important in the formation of visual dialogue to promote critical discourse.

6. Reading the Visual Dialogue

Nancy Ament-Lyon states that ‘Through the act of creating something unique and meaningful, we give form to human experience’ [12]. Philip Thompson states that ‘Graphic design is a language. Like other languages it has a vocabulary, grammar, syntax, [and] rhetoric’ [13]. Considering these statements, by examining the construction of visual art forms it should be possible to gain an understanding of how and what is being communicated. The extrapolation of information gained by examining the construction of the art works gives us an understanding of the power dynamics employed within any visual dialogue. Taking into consideration Mamiya’s statement that the visual arts have the capacity to ‘reinforce complex ideological claims and to perpetuate myths while ostensibly remaining outside the realm of heavy-handed political propaganda’ [14] a conclusion could be that art can act on both a conscious and unconscious level to reinforce, subvert, or modify the hegemony. Examples of art used to political end in Australian history were images by Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, and Clara Southern *et al.*, who belonged to a group known as the Heidelberg School. Their works expressed the unique experience of the Australian bush and fitted the criteria for the political agenda of the period. They painted ‘heroic’ or ‘idyllic’ pastoral scenes that evoked warmth and light, and Australia as the land of milk and honey. These images were exploited to lobby for independence from Britain.

This serves to underline the necessity for understanding the cultural histories and conventions of signs, symbols, and motifs through which visual dialogues are politicized.

7. Conclusion

Post-modern theorists such as, Foucault and Deleuze support the idea that the processes used to create art are significant for dialogue and meaning. Specific to this discussion is the manifestation of power and pluralism that embedded metaphors promote. Culturally specific symbolic meaning is accessed through shared experience and tradition. Many contemporary artists are using traditional designs and mediums as a starting point to construct visual dialogues to negotiate and/or assemble new identities or to locate themselves within a new social construct. The significance of this action lies in the way artists make use of visual discourse to mediate and differentiate one system or culture with and from another.

These statements underline the importance of understanding mechanisms controlling visual dialogues to facilitate entry and participation of different cultures into the Australian art arena.

The Australian Government demonstrates participation in the post-modern dialogue and some commitment to the promotion of equity for the various cultures now residing in Australia, by exhibiting contemporary Asian artists' works. Although, Chiu raises questions regarding the use of 'bi-polar' theoretical concepts and definitions of 'other' stating that, for example, the recognition and inclusion of Asian Australian artists 'disrupts the notion of [a simple] opposition[al] construct between Australia and Asia by offering a more complex equation of difference' [15]. This illustrates the necessity to continually define, redefine, and understand all manner of communications, including visual communications.

In conclusion, the question that arises is how to further assist Australia's lesser known artists and potential future artists as members of minority groups to participate in enriching Australia's multicultural position and at the same time enable them to retain their own unique cultural perspective.

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