

The Hand that Feeds

“Discussion Island”, MCA Sydney

Recently I was invited to participate in a forum, part of a series of so-called ‘Discussion Islands’ at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art. This particular event focused on the relationship between artists and curators as well as the current role of that supposedly freakish organism, the artist/curator. A lot of fodder here one would have thought for a juicy argument, perhaps a fistfight or two or just some mutual name-calling. Somehow the charged promise of these occurrences never arose. Each of the six participants, five of whom were artists and one a curator (a timely redressal of the usual power imbalance) took turns to give their perspective on the issue and all in all it was a remarkably polite affair.

Why is this? It was easy to write it off simply from the perspective of the ineptitude of the speakers (although, of course, as one of them it is not something I could ever admit to). Alternatively this apparent lack of engagement could be regarded as somehow emanating from the institution itself. Perhaps it was a management problem that transformed the defined topic into a convenient issue to be solved by those less equipped to do so (i.e. ‘mere’ practitioners). But of course the very notion of discussion demands openness and a fairly liberal smattering of irresolution and conflict. Traditionally these characteristics are antithetical to the operations of large institutions that are repeatedly required by governments and sponsors to account for their every move.

In any case this particular ‘Discussion Island’ had an ulterior motif as it was firmly cemented to the latest instalment of the MCA’s ‘Unpacked’ exhibition series. These shows occur intermittently under the auspices of artists nominated by the MCA. The artists chosen are asked to make a selection from the gallery’s permanent collection. In most instances the artists are also invited to do a little floor talk about the work they have selected. To her credit, Joan Grounds decided to utilise this opportunity to propose the aforementioned debate about artists and curators. It was a good move from a long practising contemporary artist: to share her opportunity by opening it up to potential interrogation, a role few curators would dare enact. So the intentions of this event were positively political as were Grounds’ thorough video interviews with all the artists in her ‘Unpacked’ selection. So what went wrong?

It’s easiest to begin with physical discomfort. Staging this panel discussion in the actual ‘Unpacked’ gallery space sounded like a decent idea. However being completely surrounded by artworks we were effectively expected to ignore was a little strange as well as a little oppressive. At times I couldn’t help imagining that I was sitting in some corporate foyer. Furthermore and after no more than half an hour, the gallery felt very cold. In fact it was decidedly and ever increasingly over air-conditioned. In addition, the glass and a

half of free pre-discussion white wine that initially promised to serve as intellectual lubricant proved instead, for me at least, an exceedingly efficient after-work muscle relaxant. Its effects were so thorough that they swiftly worked their way around my body from my brain and to my mouth. It was not nerves then but a mild torpor that exercised the greatest challenge for me this particular night. Thus when it came my turn to ‘perform’ I was a little stunned and had to muster every ounce of Nietzschean will in order to present my particular point of view.

In fact I had been summoned to participate in this discussion primarily as a result of my activities as co-founder, and co-director (with Lisa Kelly) of ‘Blaugrau’. During the thirteen months of that galleries existence I curated two shows (asides from co-curating the inevitable end of year fundraisers et al.). The first, ‘Vinyl’ was dedicated to artists working with recorded music and the second ‘Arkitekt’, investigated the work of practitioners who frequently cite architectural references. I decided to speak a bit about these or rather how these curatorial excursions actually held some political import especially in their self-generated openness. I complained about the gravy train of exhibitions in which the emphasis fell heavily on the side of the curator over and above an emphasis on the contemporary role of artists. In line with this I also criticised the often a-critical dependence of artists themselves who wait to be curated, the waiting bit being symptomatic of genuine denial of any notion of independent creative agency. More criticisms were offered (by me) about the predictability of many contemporary exhibitions in which (and it appears to be a global trend) the same artists appear ad nauseum. Lack of risk-taking I think it’s called and it often results, once again, from excesses of institutional, populist and corporate pressure. Exciting exhibitions, I argued, framed work in such ways that even potentially conflicting meanings were magnified rather than levelled (i.e. such shows represented, at best, strategies and not mere ‘choice’ collections). In these instances the conceptual demands and idiosyncrasies of the artists were similarly respected. Other exciting approaches, I went on, were those in which curatorial method was ignored or undermined by deliberately celebrating complexity sometimes to the point of incoherence. There was little room here for anything more specific and soon the microphone (gladly) left my hands.

Ah, the microphone, that dowser of spontaneous disagreement, that encourager of earnest, isolated sound bites! Actually it is amazing what happens to an audience faced with someone with a microphone. And no matter how softly spoken that person is the technology always lends itself an authoritarian edge that is also vaguely ridiculous. In this case the microphone served more as a documentary tool anyway as the audience was so small that electronic amplification was unnecessary. So now there exists somewhere within the labyrinth of the MCA, records of

that night's discussion captured for who knows what future purpose, what future recriminations? That is not to say that no one else had anything pertinent to offer either. My Le Thi, one of the other artists involved in the discussion spoke from the perspective of her Vietnamese background. She suggested that many curators were actually completely uninterested in 'minority' art unless it could be framed precisely in that way. Artists from such backgrounds were also less appealing because they often inhabited tight communities based some distance from Sydney's more fashionable inner city. Here it was easy to be reminded also of the way in which Aboriginal art is regularly treated as an isolated genre separate from mainstream contemporary art.

Jacky Redgate, another artist on the panel, a highly accomplished, high-profile practitioner hailing originally from Adelaide had yet another take on the matter. She spoke of the generative era of her practice during the nineteen eighties and how that time shaped many of the practices and attitudes of today's contemporary art scene. At this point an audience member proffered a few nostalgic diversions. The gist of these offerings was basically this: the olden days were radical thanks to artists of the previous generation while today's artists were 'squares' who should be very grateful to their older peers. Yeah well, in effect much of this may be true however it also evinced a certain arrogance as well as an ignorance of the more politicised attitudes of some younger artists and their networks. Plus it is always easy to speak as a 'radical' from the safety of commercial and institutional recognition. Anyway the previously mentioned panellist continued to quote information she'd garnered from Internet searches on curators and curating. Some spicy info here! There was even a suggestion that many international biennales of contemporary art actually provided critical nourishment on par with the sort of actual (profoundly absent) nourishment served up via global fast food chains! Pull out the stops I say!

Finally the only curator on the panel, Blair French, spoke pithily of his free-lance activities. Indeed it was illuminating to hear him speak and it made me aware of how infrequently artists have the opportunity to hear, from their own mouths, the underlying *raison d'être* behind a curator's practice. Of course many highly visible curators are prepared to go on at length about how they 'staged' this show, how they 'discovered' that artist, as though the artist in question had previously been some kind of shapeless cloud looking for the right container. Refreshingly this particular curator's attitude was very unlike this. Instead he spoke of the generational changes that have occurred in curatorial practice over the past two decades. He mentioned how the institution of curatorial studies has only fairly recently emerged as a distinct profession one only needed to study to be any good at. The filter down effect of this, it was proposed, divided, rather than collaboratively conjoined, the

activities of artists and curators. Furthermore, the point was also made that successful curating actually required passion, can you believe it, advocating something as wasteful as passion in age of 'rational' economics and vocational education!? Aligned with this suggestion was another, this being that in order to curate successfully the curator actually had to pay heed to their other life experiences and remain open to the way in which these might pollinate the area of their chosen 'professional expertise'. Through such words I even thought it might be possible for artists to rekindle faith in the attitudes of curators without just necessarily succumbing to misplaced utopian fantasies about the nature of their positions.

OK, I have to admit that all in all it was not simply a waste of time, despite the institutional claustrophobia, the air-conditioned freeze, the dearth of audience, the clumsy microphone handling, the usual audience questions going nowhere etc. etc. In fact possibly the most astute question raised during the night came from an audience member, an MCA gallery attendant, an older man with an American accent who piped up asking, 'aren't you artists all just being a little too soft on the role of curators and institutions when they undeniably hold hierarchical privilege over your work and force you into particularly questionable power relations with them?' (not his exact words but close nonetheless). Fantastic! An old lefty I thought, in no patronising sense. Here at last was a chance to get it all out there, shift the audience/panel dynamic around, break through some all too tightly controlled institutional barriers. Alas, the microphone thing again and an overall sense of a disinterest in politics despite all the especially dire crap we've all been subjected to recently by various 'democratically' elected governments. Also from own viewpoint I was still amazed at the soporific effects humble white wine can have on the tired mind and body. So the night came to an end, no dramas, no breakthroughs, just lots of words delivered with the absolute minimum of frisson. Afterwards it was suggested everyone meet in the pub across the road where really I thought this whole caper should have begun. Not that such a feeling came from any longing for 'pure' bohemianism but rather because outside the institution of the MCA the potential potency of this debate might have developed along some fine and organic tangents. These in turn might have actually engendered creative possibilities and tensions among the various participants. That is despite the danger that by visiting any pub in The Rocks questions of art or politics are liable to be replaced altogether by deep discussions about ones love of Riverdance.

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