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The predicament of diversity: Multiculturalism in practice at the art museum

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Abstract

Mainstream cultural institutions such as museums are increasingly called upon to increase their accessibility to culturally diverse communities and audiences, including migrant groups who do not generally visit museums. This essay discusses the challenges experienced by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the largest art museum in Sydney, Australia, in mounting an exhibition of Buddhist art in 2001, and in its efforts to use the exhibition as a vehicle for drawing new audiences in, especially Asian Buddhist groups. The case study raises important questions about possibilities and limits of engaging cultural diversity in the art museum. The biases inherent in the operations of the art museum, especially its non-negotiable reliance on a Western concept of 'art', are at the heart of the predicament of diversity for art museum practice.

Keywords: Audiences, Asian art, Buddhism, cultural diversity, ethnic communities

Introduction

A key element of social and cultural transformation in the past few decades is captured by the term diversity. Indeed, diversity has now become a common-place characteristic of contemporary societies: it is no longer possible to describe them in the modernist terms of one people, one culture, and one language. The homogeneous nation state, both as myth and as reality, is a thing of the past. Most societies now feel the impact of increased global migrations in the past century, and that impact is experienced most directly in the proliferation of cultural differences across society. Indeed, the rise of the so-called politics of difference has seen the assertion of an ever-widening range of groups making their presence felt on the cultural landscape, and claiming the right to express their different cultural identities and allegiances.

When governments talk about managing diversity, they generally refer to the need to somehow recognize and accommodate these differences within the conduct of public administration. Articulated in policy terms in that controversial word, multiculturalism, it has now become commonly accepted within liberal democracies, at least at the level of official discourse, that the diverse needs and interests of ethnic minorities – those who are (seen as) culturally different – must be recognized and catered for. This new emphasis on cultural diversity has major implications for the operations of long-standing national cultural institutions, including museums and galleries. Indeed, today's museums are under intense pressure to prove their relevance for multicultural constituencies. For example, in the late 1990s the New South Wales State Government in Australia issued a policy document, *The Arts and Cultural Diversity*, that required 'all State-funded arts and cultural institutions and

activities [to] incorporate and reflect the State's cultural diversity, and thereby open up resources and opportunities to artists and communities of non-English speaking backgrounds' (NSW Ministry for the Arts, 1997).

This governmental imperative is part of a sea change in official conceptions of the relation between art and the people in the past few decades. From the 1970s onwards, as calls for cultural democratization and emancipation made their impact felt in all corners of society, institutions that were perceived to be 'elite' were increasingly challenged and by the 1980s, as Lianne Gibson has pointed out, 'access to and participation in the arts had come to be constructed as a *right* of citizenship' (Gibson, 2001: 73). In other words, 'access and participation', especially by groups that were marginalized from mainstream society such as migrants of different cultural backgrounds, have now become key objectives of arts and cultural policy. This shift in the expectations and demands made of the cultural sector is an international trend. As Richard Sandell (1998: 401) has observed in relation to the situation in Tony Blair's United Kingdom, 'museums are being asked to assume new roles and develop new ways of working – in general, to clarify and demonstrate their social purpose and more specifically to reinvent themselves as agents of social inclusion'. Mainstream cultural institutions can no longer remain aloof; in principle at least, they have to engage with diverse communities who have so far been excluded from their privileged space, involve them and bring them in. Museums are now required to actively work to remove 'the barriers which impede all citizens from having equal rights of access to [their] cultural resources' (Bennett, 1996: 9).

The social and political significance placed on cultural diversity today is apparently deeply antithetical to what museums stand for, especially art museums. After all, since their establishment in the 19th-century, art museums have developed a long-standing history and reputation as cultural palaces for the white, (upper) middle-class elites. In his classic sociological study of what he calls 'the aesthetic disposition', *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has compellingly argued that the art museum's main function is that of maintaining class hierarchies. The true function of these 'sacred palaces of art', he says, is 'to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion' (Bourdieu and Darbell, 1991: 112).

Art museums, then, have traditionally been, and perhaps cannot escape from being, elite institutions. Their purpose was the institutionalization and dissemination of a single high culture, which would confirm the lowliness of the cultures of the outsiders – the working classes, immigrants, and so on. Indeed, writing about the history of the American public art museum, Duncan (1995) makes the point that the new art museums of the 19th-century were an element of a larger agenda to make American cities more civilized, sanitary, moral and peaceful in the face of the perceived threat of the ever-growing waves of culturally alien immigrants. In other words, art museums were envisaged as instruments for cultural assimilation.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in Sydney, Australia, is in its origins a prime exemplar of this classic 19th-century model of the art museum. Established in the 1870s, it occupies a central and authoritative place in the cultural infrastructure of metropolitan Sydney. The gallery's status as a seat of cultural power is reinforced by its physical monumentality. Its imposing façade looks like a Greco-Roman temple and its interior is dominated by a huge, cathedral-like central foyer opening up to grand halls and galleries to its right, left, back, upstairs and downstairs, where precious works of art are

solemnly displayed for visual contemplation and aesthetic appreciation. The gallery is set apart from the hustle and bustle of the city, occupying an elevated location at the end of one of Sydney's most prized parklands, the Domain, overlooking the wide expanse of Sydney harbour. The whole ambiance of the museum, exterior as well as interior, has a grandeur that incites visitors to be impressed, if not awed. Entering it, visitors know that they are in a lofty space, where one is supposed to behave appropriately – with decorum and refinement.

But are art museums condemned to forever reproduce class and cultural hierarchies? Or are they capable of change, of adjusting to the more inclusionary and egalitarian requirements of today's society? In this article, I want to look at how the AGNSW has responded to such calls for cultural democratization through a case study of one particular exhibition: a blockbuster show of Buddhist art, held in the (southern) summer of 2001/2002. Recognizing and respecting cultural diversity is a crucial element of the museum's public service role in officially multicultural democracies such as Australia. How such a general principle can be translated into museum practice, however, poses some difficulties, not least because cultural diversity itself brings about a range of complex and contradictory problems and dilemmas, which are not always reconcilable. Through conversations with AGNSW staff, we gained insight into their efforts to resolve the problems and dilemmas they were faced with, and more generally, how the predicament of diversity impacts on the work of the art museum in the early 21st-century¹.

Exhibiting 'Buddha': Asian Art for Diverse Audiences?

In their seminal publication, *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991) Ivan Karp and Stephen Lavine argued that to serve the needs of multicultural audiences, museums, especially art museums, must abandon their image as temple and adopt the notion of a museum as forum, a place where visitors have the opportunity to learn about different cultural traditions and perspectives. The art museum, then, would no longer operate as the arbiter of 'good taste', but as a facilitator in the communication of different forms of cultural expression which reflect the values, interests and experiences of particular communities. This is the notion of the museum as a cross-cultural 'contact zone' (Clifford, 1997).

To be sure, this formulation requires a huge transformation in the (self-) definition of the art museum. While museums were, in their 19th-century conception, intended *for* the people, they were certainly not *of* the people in the sense of displaying any interest in their lives, habits and interests (Bennett, 1988: 64). Indeed, when entering the museum, the people were supposed to leave their lives, habits and interests – that is to say, their own cultures and identities – behind, outside the refined and civilizing space of the museum. In the notion of a museum as a cross-cultural contact zone, however, people are supposed to bring their cultures and identities with them into the museum, and actively participate in all levels of museum practice: the selection and design of displays, the interpretations of objects, the public programs. In Philip Wright's vision (1989: 134), the goal is 'to bring about a diffusion of power and privilege from the specialist to the non-specialist'. In short, the museum must – ideally speaking – become a champion of inclusive cultural democracy.

At the AGNSW, the new challenges are felt particularly acutely by those responsible for Asian art. It appears that Asian art poses particular difficulties, but also interesting

¹ Interviews with AGNSW staff were part of a three-year Australian Research Council SPIRT project Realms of the Buddha: Museums, Cultural Diversity and Audience Development, chief investigators Ien Ang and Judith Snodgrass, in collaboration with the AGNSW and the Migration Heritage Centre.

opportunities for the art museum – difficulties and opportunities having to do precisely with the contradictions of the politics of diversity, access and participation in the art museum context. Because Asian art is non-western art, it is positioned as culturally different – and therefore a useful starting point for the representation of diversity. Asian art brings aesthetic styles and cultural forms into the space of AGNSW that are different from those of western schools of art, which form the bulk of the AGNSW's collections. However, Jackie Menzies, Head Curator of Asian Art, complains that it is very hard to attract audiences to visit Asian exhibitions. She believes that this is because Australians are not familiar with Asian culture: 'There is no Asia literacy out there – well, very little – and Asia literacy is not related to art' (12 April 2001).

She gives the example of a young journalist who was sent to the gallery to write about a show it hosted in 1999, *Treasures of Asian Art*, which was a selection of exquisite artworks from the John D. Rockefeller III collection of the New York Asia Society. When she was showing the journalist what she, Menzies, considered a particularly fine object, the journalist exclaimed: 'You tell me, how do I know that's a fine piece, why don't you put the bad piece next to it, so if you're presenting these as art I can at least distinguish them'. Menzies vividly remembers this incident as formative to her own thinking about how to present Asian art to the public. The Rockefeller show failed to attract audiences because it consisted of individual works of art which were supposedly beautiful objects, but which audiences couldn't understand: '*you are presenting completely different cultural values and aesthetics out of context*'. Edmund Capon, the influential and charismatic Director of the AGNSW, put it this way: 'everybody thought they were the most beautiful objects but because it was lacking an intellectual or historical or ideological theme, people just saw it as just a collection of objects and it didn't capture the imagination at all. We only had about 20–25,000 people through' (9 April 2001).

In this light, Menzies has come to the conclusion that exhibitions of Asian art can only succeed if she makes them more accessible to audiences. Accessibility, how to increase it, is her biggest and most testing concern, her overriding preoccupation. What is interesting here is that Menzies' desire to attract bigger audiences for Asian art has made her more acutely aware of the need to contextualize the displayed objects of art, to bring them closer to the lifeworlds of potential audiences. This, certainly, is an important democratizing move, especially in an art museum environment. Wright (1989) considers what he terms the 'suppression of context' as a key feature of conservative art museum elitism. Menzies recounts that it was this consideration that was behind the decision to produce a major exhibition featuring Buddhist art:

I decided to do a show on Buddha because Buddhism is out there in the community, everyone has heard of Buddha, it's easy and readily comprehensible. And people will know about it, and it's so basic to Asia, so fundamental to so many Asian cultures (12 April 2001).

Capon, who is himself a specialist and lover of Chinese art, was also confident that a Buddha show would engage a broader audience, although he suspected that it was 'a bit more interested in the concepts of Buddhism than the art of Buddhism' (9 April 2001).

Focus group sessions, commissioned to a market research firm, among two groups that Menzies particularly wished to reach through the show – young people and Asians – confirmed that a Buddha exhibition would generate a lot of interest because people were

interested in Buddhism as such. The exhibition was perceived to be for all types of people from religious to alternative, with a focus on young people. The research also indicated that Asians would be interested in an exhibition on Buddha if it was a cultural exhibition, not just art. In general, people wanted as much context as possible, such as the life story of the historical Buddha, the meaning of Buddhist symbols, how Buddhism has affected different countries, the range of different forms of Buddhism, and so on. In short, they wanted the show 'to tell a story'. In response to this research, Menzies indeed proceeded to shape the exhibition accordingly.

Visitors to the Buddha exhibition were led through seven large, interconnected halls filled with superior Buddhist works of art, many of which were loaned from private collectors and some of the world's most prestigious museums such as the Hermitage and the British Museum. So art objects remained the centrepiece of the exhibition, but their display was arranged according to a narrative. The first hall told the narrative of the Life of Buddha, represented by the Eight Great Events, and the following rooms were designed to explain how Buddhism has spread across time and space. In other words, the show tried to avoid the decontextualized display of 'one hundred statues of Buddha sitting in a room' – something that focus group informants said they would be especially put off by.

The endeavour to link the theme of the exhibition as closely as possible to what gallery staff believed was the main interest of potential visitors was also reflected in the slow germination of the title for the show. Through different stages the title went from 'Realms of the Buddhas' (which was to convey the enormous multiplicity of Buddhist traditions) to 'Buddha: Transcending Space and Time' (which emphasized the enormous historical and geographical spread of Buddhism) to something quite different: 'Buddha: Radiant Awakening'. When we first interviewed Menzies seven months before the exhibition opened, the final title was not yet arrived at, but the word radiance had already made its appearance: 'Buddha: The Radiance Within'. As Menzies explained:

I was asking myself why people would come to the Buddha show. It has to be personally relevant to them and their life. We know that what's driving people with interest in Buddhism is their search for spiritual fulfilment. So then I thought, how are you used to talking about this experience of the Buddhahood within? That's when [co-curator] Adrian [Snodgrass] came up with the word 'radiance', which is a lovely word (12 April 2001).

In other words, in the very title of the exhibition, the chosen pitch was not, as the original titles suggested, an academic, art-historical emphasis on the 'objective' significance of Buddha in Asian cultures, but a much more intimate, subjective focus on the spiritual meaning that Buddhism was seen to have for many people. In other words, the title had an imagined visitor in mind, and tried to resonate with that imagined visitor's interest. Its 'new age' associations were not coincidental. Indeed, from the very beginning Gallery staff recognized that the spirituality connection provided a potential market for this exhibition – a lot of marketing effort was therefore put into tapping this market through communications at yoga schools, meditation groups, mind-body-spirit festivals, alternative therapy centres, and so on. In this way, the show cleverly attempted to exploit the current popularity of Buddhism among westerners.

But the gallery also saw great potential in attracting new, Asian audiences to the Buddha show. After all, Sydney has a large and very diverse Asian immigrant population, originating from across East and Southeast Asian countries. For many people of Asian backgrounds,

however, the meaning of Buddhism will not have much to do with the spirituality boom in the West. In many Asian countries – particularly East and Southeast Asia – Buddhism is a taken for granted and integral part of everyday life, not an ‘alternative’ religion or philosophy. For some Asian migrants, then, it may be associated with their cultural heritage or the history of their country of origin; for them, according to the focus group interviews, a Buddha exhibition might be an opportunity to rediscover that heritage or history. Many other Asian migrants, especially more recent migrants, have brought their Buddhist practices and rituals with them and have introduced them into their daily surroundings in the migrant context. Most spectacularly, in the past few decades dozens of Buddhist places of worship have sprung up across the greater metropolitan area of Sydney, established with the active support of local migrant communities. Indeed, the genesis for the Buddha exhibition, according to Menzies, was a visit she made to a crowning of the stupa ceremony at a meditation centre in the Blue Mountains, an hour and a half’s drive from central Sydney. As she relates:

The stupa had been donated by the Burmese community, while the images to be enshrined in niches around the base, as well as the *hti* (umbrella) for the pinnacle, had been sent out from Burma. It was a great community day with everyone relaxed and cheerful, the weather perfect, and a buffet of delicious food. It was so obvious that Buddhism was thriving and expanding throughout Australia that I resolved to investigate further this new aspect of the Asianisation of Australia (Menzies, 2002: 12).

From the AGNSW’s point of view, reaching out to these thriving Asian Buddhist communities and somehow getting them involved in the Buddha exhibition was an attractive idea; it would make good the social imperative of catering for cultural diversity that cultural institutions are now under pressure to comply with, and it would be an opportunity to attract new groups to the gallery, to diversify the gallery’s audience base, to break down some of its elite connotations. How to do this, however, was easier said than done. This is not a conventional marketing exercise. To establish effective links with groups which are outside the orbit of the regular art museum going audience, the AGNSW needed to go beyond its professional comfort zone and enter into relatively uncharted territory: it needed to engage with specific communities ‘out there’ in a way which goes far beyond the relatively superficial way in which marketers tend to know the audience.

Museums generally relegate this task of community networking to a public programmes department. It is a task that requires a different mindset: marketers tend to think promotionally, in terms of reaching a critical mass of visitors coming in, whereas public programmers have to think educationally, with a much more hands-on and dialogic approach to audience involvement and a more in-depth consideration for the special needs and interests of particular audience groups. The work of the public programmes department is events-driven: it organizes lectures, tours, children’s workshops, programmes for schools, special events in relation to temporary exhibitions, and so on. Much of this work relates precisely to the improvement of the museum’s accessibility, to enhance the visitor’s experience and, more generally, to lower the ‘barriers’ to the gallery, especially for new audiences. But these audiences would need, of course, to be ‘lured’ into the museum in the first place.

This challenge led to one of the most innovative aspects of the ‘Buddha: Radiant Awakening’ exhibition. It was the setting up of a so-called ‘Wisdom Room’, a spacious room in the middle of the exhibition space, where each week – for the duration of the full 14 weeks that the show was on – a Sydney-based Buddhist community would ‘show their wares’, as it were, to put themselves on display. People visiting the exhibition unavoidably get into the

Wisdom Room during their itinerary through the rooms full of serene and beautiful works of art, and will encounter something they might not expect: living Buddhist cultures. Ann MacArthur, the coordinator of Asian public programmes and the main organizer of the Wisdom Room events, told about the rationale for this idea:

We are realizing that people want to know about the culture – that’s what Jo [the market researcher] keeps emphasizing. It’s not the object by itself so much as, for example, if the object comes from China – they want to know more about Chinese culture or Buddhist culture. So we decided that instead of segregating the public programmes from the art displays we will have our own room where we can put an altar in the exhibition area to demonstrate the setting for so many of the objects. We will set it up as an altar for use, rather than just, you know, an altar on display in a case. We will have this room to set up events and it will be *within* the exhibition in order to attract people to pay the ticket price and come into the exhibition and then have the opportunity to, say, meet a monk and experience living Buddhist culture. And the proposal is that different Buddhist groups sign up for their week at the Art Gallery (15 May 2001).

The preparation of the Wisdom Room activities was an extremely time-consuming but horizon-broadening exercise, requiring MacArthur and others to network extensively with dozens of Buddhist groups and communities who have their temples and other places of worship, sometimes not more than a converted suburban house, spread out across the sprawling metropolitan Sydney region – writing them letters, visiting them, showing them around in the museum, explaining the purpose of the exhibition to them, and so on². Eventually, a 14-week programme was established with participating groups ranging from the Taiwanese Nan Tien Temple in Wollongong, the Sydney Zen Centre, the Vietnamese Phuoc Hue Buddhist Monastery in Wetherill Park. Activities ranged from a Korean tea ceremony, the making of a mandala, chanting and praying, and so on.

Interestingly, the very selection process of the participating groups underscored some of the difficulties of this kind of community liaison work, and highlighted the sensitive nature of relations within the cross-cultural contact zone. MacArthur described how some groups were much more ready to participate than others:

The western Buddhists who have probably been to the Art Gallery before came right back and said, can we have two weeks? These groups tend to concentrate in the Zen or Tibetan Buddhist traditions. The Gyuto Monks, they are Tibetans but they have a western events manager who slots them into events programs and festivals around Australia (15 May 2001).

In other words, it was precisely those groups which were more marginal to mainstream Australian society – the kind of groups that cultural diversity policies would presumably be designed to target – who were more difficult to reach: they were typically less assertive than the western Buddhist groups and needed much more assistance and support. Often, an extensive process of induction and familiarization needed to be carried out: for many of the groups the AGNSW was simply an alien institution. They didn’t know what it was, where it was, and how one was supposed to behave once one was in it.

² The Wisdom Room activities could not have taken place without the huge amount of work carried out by research assistant Megan Parnell and research student Katie Russell in the project, and without my co-researcher Judith Snodgrass’s extensive familiarity with Sydney Buddhist communities.

This is perhaps not surprising, and it does say something about the enormity of the cultural gap that needs to be bridged. The important role played by MacArthur in organizing the Wisdom Room events was that of a cross-cultural translator or mediator, literally and symbolically moving between vastly different cultural realms and putting a huge effort into creating a kind of temporary common ground, a mutually agreed understanding of the event to be embarked on. Needless-to-say, the interaction, which was initiated by the AGNSW, was not based on equality: it was on the AGNSW's terms that the marginal groups were invited to present themselves within the privileged space of the museum. Nevertheless, the Wisdom Room turned out to be a great success, receiving much positive feedback from both visitors and the participating groups. For example, when the Vietnamese Phuoc Hue temple had their week in the Wisdom Room, busloads of Vietnamese migrants, most of whom lived several hours away in far-flung Sydney suburbs, visited the gallery to attend the activities. As Menzies reflects, one month after the opening of the exhibition:

I think it's terrific, the way we just handed that space over, the Wisdom Room, to every group, so they can do what they like. That is involving them. It's interactive. It's empowering. I think all that's very important in terms of what Buddhism is, it is a living religion, it's important to all these communities (December 2001).

In other words, one could argue that the Wisdom Room represented a case where the AGNSW, or at least one circumscribed space within it, was turned into a cross-cultural contact zone of sorts, a space where encounters between groups with very unequal sources of power and disparate cultural identities could take place. Each group made the space its own for the duration of the week, it was their 'show'. More specifically, the Wisdom Room was a space where groups who normally exist out of sight from the dominant culture gained visibility – if only temporarily – in a very privileged site of that dominant culture itself!

The Predicament of Art

The Buddha show was a milestone in the gradual 'mainstreaming' of Asian art at the AGNSW. The timing seemed right: opening in 2001, a few months after the dramatic events of September 11, it was a time when the public mood was firmly focused on the search for spiritual values. In this sense, putting Buddha in the limelight clearly struck a chord. In terms of its cultural diversity strategy, however, the achievements were less easily articulated. In AGNSW staff's considerations there was an enduring conflation, if not confusion between promoting Asian art to a general audience – which is arguably a laudable objective in itself in terms of opening the public up to different realms of cultural and artistic representation – and using Asian art as a conduit to turn the AGNSW into a more socially inclusive institution by bringing in ethnic minority audiences, primarily Asian audiences. While the Wisdom Room was an innovative community participation initiative that successfully brought new groups into the gallery, ultimately the main focus remained firmly on the mainstream arts audience. This is confirmed by marketing director Belinda Hanrahan, who was very pleased with the overall marketing of the show:

One of the things that I was really keen to do was to ensure that our loyal audience was interested in it. Classic marketing theory says that it's much easier to get your loyal audience to come back than to get a completely new one. But we weren't always convinced that our loyal audience was that completely committed to Asian art. Until we know how to convert our own loyalists, you can't begin to grapple with converting those who are a less loyal audience (29 August 2002).

The message here is that diversifying audiences to include groups of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds will have a lower priority, despite the rhetoric of the desirability of including them. As the logic of marketing prevailed, then, concern with cultural diversity took a back seat.

This does not mean that the AGNSW does not remain acutely aware of the need to attract a more diverse range of regular visitors. Director Capon puts it succinctly:

Our problem is very clear, that we don't get the Chinese community in here. We don't get the Indian community in here. We don't get the Vietnamese community in here; we just don't do it. Somehow, you see, we're perceived to be a kind of European cultural institution (Capon, 9 April 2001).

Capon reasons that a crucial barrier to the museum's accessibility to many people of Asian backgrounds is their lack of familiarity with the very idea of the art museum. As he explains, this is because there is no great tradition of the art museum in Asia, where cultural objects are generally valued more for their civilizational significance – showcasing a glorious past, for example – than for their artistic excellence.

This reasoning makes sense of the focus group finding that Asian audiences would be more interested in a show about the culture rather than the art of Buddhism. The Buddha show was the culmination of a learning process at the AGNSW that art for art's sake is not a selling point for Asian audiences: the way to bring them in is through a theme and through special events. All Gallery staff we spoke with mentioned two formative examples of Asian shows prior to the Buddha show, where something was learned about the need to integrate art and culture in an exhibition. The first example was 'Dancing to the Flute' (1997), an exhibition of music and dance in Indian art, which attracted many Indian visitors who were specifically targeted through a direct marketing campaign amongst Indian community organizations and associations. The exhibition included live performances by Indian dancers and musicians in the exhibition space, which were particularly well-received. The other exhibition was 'Masks of Mystery', featuring Chinese bronze figures from the ancient Shu Kingdom (2000). The gallery invested heavily in wooing the Sydney Chinese community into the show, but only with partial success. MacArthur again:

We had 'Masks of Mystery', that was a Chinese archaeological exhibition, so it happened that in Sydney someone had a replica of the chime bells that were excavated – it's also a famous excavation. So we had free bell performances, and there were hundreds of people listening to the sounds of ancient Chinese bells. Unfortunately they just came to listen to the bells, they didn't pay to see the exhibition (15 May 2001).

The mistake made here, so it was learned, was that the special event – the bell performances – should have been a part of the exhibition, not outside it. In other words, people should be forced to buy an entry ticket – and hence to go through the rooms with the art – if they wished to attend the cultural performance. This, indeed, was the strategy adopted for the Wisdom Room in the Buddha show.

Interestingly, then, these Asian art exhibitions have amounted to a significant re-conception of standard exhibition design. The very fact that Asian art is seen as difficult to sell, together with the instinctive assumption that this art should be of interest to particular ethnic audiences if only they could be persuaded to come and visit, has led to an emerging practice within the AGNSW to surround the objects of art with cultural experiences which are closer to home, so

to speak. As Capon put it, 'it's got to be promoted and sold as an exhibition with an experience, it cannot be just about objects'.

One implication of this change is the possibility of a more pluralistic attitude towards the object, a recognition of its polysemy – the different kinds of meaning and value that can be attached to it. Menzies articulates this consideration well in relation to objects on display at the Buddha show:

I think we've displayed them quite sensitively without putting them all in mock-up altars or demeaning them or whatever. So we're showing [them] as good works of art as well as, I hope, respecting what they do mean to people who are Buddhist (December 2001).

Here, Menzies shows an astute understanding of the politics of interpretation that is inherent in exhibition display, and that a more democratic display would allow visitors to relate to the objects from their own points of view. But this new-found pluralism cannot be taken too far. The core of the AGNSW's institutional product is and remains 'art'. Asked what an exhibition should minimally be for her as a curator, Menzies' response was resolute: 'It has to be art. I believe in the integrity of objects.' She echoes here her highly respected director, Capon, who insists that art has to be the starting point for all exhibitions at the Gallery. 'Yeah, absolutely, it has to be', he says. 'Otherwise you end up with conceptual exhibitions where the work of art is merely a bit of information. I mean, if the work of art is information there's not a great experience, then you might as well forget the whole thing' (9 April 2001). Even the public programmes' people agree that their work revolves around the works of art: it is driven by the object. As MacArthur explained:

We always try to start from a visual artwork and then take a theme out from there. For example, when we had another Indian dancer in last week, she could stand there and say well, I'm going to now do a dance for Krishna, you can see him here, in this painting . . . it's directly related (15 May 2001).

In the end, then, presenting 'beautiful and wonderful works of art' is and remains the AGNSW's core business. This means that an implicit notion that one knows what is 'art' remains intact, and this sets limits to the inclusion of other, non-aesthetic discourses into the exhibition. Thus, while the Wisdom Room, where community groups could showcase their living practices, was an integral part of the Buddha exhibition as a whole, it was still set apart, symbolically and physically, from the other rooms, where the objects of art were displayed. This separation was also evident during the preparation of the show, including the curatorial work of selecting the objects. As Menzies recalls, it proved to be important to maintain the boundaries of museum professionalism and art-historical scholarship:

I dropped involving the communities in the selection of objects after we had a few meetings. Professionally this is an art museum, so although at first we did talk about that idea of involving people, then you realize there is something about knowing what the art is and having access to good collections of art. So we did drop that (December 2001).

In other words, there was a limit to the process of democratization and pluralization that was set in train with the inclusion of the community groups: that limit was reached when it came to the judgment of aesthetic value – the art museum's most exalted source of cultural power. It is at this point that the diffusion of power from the specialist to the non-specialist, as favoured by Wright (1989), was firmly resisted. The upshot of this – in many ways unavoidable – division of labour, then, is still a reification of the art object: there is no

question that the art takes centre stage in the exhibition. While the exhibition, through educational labels and narrative wall texts and through the thematic arrangement of the objects, did tell a story – the story of a Buddhism radiating in manifold directions – it does this, as Capon put it, ‘through works of art, so that people can actually look at wonderful works of art and enjoy it’.

It should be noted that even this relatively conservative strategy of integrating art and culture was met with some fierce criticism by the art establishment. In reviewing the *Buddha: Radiant Awakening* exhibition art critic Bruce James complained bitterly about the lack of ‘the language of common connoisseurship’ in the presentation of the objects. As he wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Aesthetics have been vacuumed out of *Radiant Awakening*. No distinction is made between the merits of a 19th century banner painting from Thailand and those of a 12th century Cambodian bronze. For all the viewer knows, merit does not enter into it. Perhaps Western standards were deemed inappropriate as display criteria in the context of an enterprise so non-Western in its range of inclusions. This would be well and good in a historical museum, where objects simply convey ideas. It is inexplicable in an art gallery, where they embody taste (James, 2001).

James was also dismissive of the Wisdom Room, which he described as ‘a Dharmic theme park in the middle of an art show’. And he concludes: ‘I would have thought the very purpose of *Radiant Awakening* was to awaken audiences to the glories of Buddhist art, not Buddhism – for certainly the categories are separable. They have to be, otherwise this is not an exhibition but a sacred service’ (2001). James, then, adopted a purist, western aesthetic point of view. To him, any contextualization of the objects within their conceptual, cultural and spiritual history was an unwelcome dilution of the art museum’s mission.

Still, the ‘Buddha: Radiant Awakening’ exhibition did make it possible for visitors to establish a diversity of relationships with the objects, and not always in purely aesthetic terms. For example, one visitor, a Chinese woman, was seen to come to the show every week – thanks to the availability of a season ticket – bringing exquisite crystals with her that she lay on the feet of some of the statues and gave away to other visitors. It was, she said, a way of honouring her recently deceased mother. Importantly, the Gallery guards were instructed not to prevent the woman from doing so. Thus, the temple or art became another kind of temple; the show was both an art exhibition *and* a sacred site. In this instance, cultural diversity is articulated within the art museum in interesting and unexpected ways.

Conclusion

What, then, can the Buddha show say about the impact of multiculturalism and cultural diversity requirements on the art museum? Despite their increasingly uncertain role and direction, art museums still enjoy a dignified status today because art has always been considered self-evidently important in bourgeois society. In the realm of high culture, art – and love of art – is a respectable pursuit for its own sake, a marker of civilization and distinction. This bourgeois aesthetic disposition towards art, as dissected and critiqued so forcefully by Bourdieu (1984), still exercises considerable symbolic power and authority, and still informs to a large extent the functioning of art museums such as the AGNSW. As the interviews with AGNSW staff have illuminated, a commitment to art is a fundamental cornerstone of the very *raison d’être* of the gallery as a cultural institution. Indeed, as Nick

Prior (2002: 213) has observed, ‘the potential dissolution of an autonomous high culture’ would surely mean the demise of the art museum as we know it.

However, under pressure to change, to become less elitist and more responsive to the increasing cultural diversity of society at large, art museum practice, at the AGNSW and elsewhere, is now driven by a variety of motivations and principles, some of them residual, others emergent. Social and cultural pressures are bringing about changes in exhibition practice which effect a gradual repositioning of art, opening it up to a more diverse range of experiences and relationships. Steered by the formidable expectations society has come to impress on them – access and participation, social inclusion, recognition of and respect for difference – art museums struggle to prove their relevance for an ever greater range of culturally diverse constituencies. But success is never guaranteed: for some groups, the art museum’s cultural world is so intrinsically alien that they will never be persuaded to become visitors. Indeed, as we recognize that society is the repository of an irreducible heterogeneity of social, cultural and aesthetic values which can never be fully captured within the space of the art museum, the latter may have to resign in its own particularity and its own (partial) irrelevance. This does not mean that the museum should – or even can – stop trying, on the contrary. Cultural diversity has therefore become a *predicament* for the museum: engaging with it is a task and a responsibility as crucial as much as it is irresolvable.

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