Explanatory Note: Cultural Sector Interviews

Australian Cultural Fields researchers conducted a range of semi-structured interviews (26 in total) with key government, industry and agency professionals to enhance our knowledge of the changing dynamics of Australian cultural fields since 1994, although often encompassing earlier periods. The interviewees are individuals with deep experience and expertise in their respective fields.

Following the completion of the project, several interviewees gave their permission for these transcripts to be uploaded to the ACF project website for wide public dissemination and reasons of posterity.

Interviews were recorded and professional transcribers turned them into text. In reviewing the transcripts, interviewers checked both audio and text for accuracy as much as was feasible. There is some variation in transcription style and notation, and in many cases further editing was undertaken in consultation with the interviewee (and, in one case, the person responsible for their estate).

The interview material was checked by the interviewers, interviewees (and, as noted, a representative in one case) and other members of the Australian Cultural Fields research team for clarity and accuracy. Often these transcripts are conversational in nature, and no attempt has been made to correct the inevitable *non-sequiturs*, grammatical errors etc. of 'organic' oral communication. Some interview sections were deleted at the request of the interviewees or because of potential legal implications. These deletions are flagged where it is necessary to preserve the overall coherence of the interview. The views expressed in the interviews are those of the interviewees.

These interviews were conducted with approval of the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (H11025). Subsequent approval to publish the transcripts to the ACF website was given following a research ethics amendment request. Some cultural sector interviews were not published according to the wishes of the interviewee (or their representative).

We extend our sincere gratitude to the interviewees and their representatives for permission to share these transcripts, and for their assistance in preparing them to be uploaded to the ACF website.

Australian Cultural Fields researchers are confident that these qualitative data, alongside other data analysed in our many research publications, constitute an enduring resource for future cultural research and debate in Australia and beyond.

Edmund Capon (first of two interviews)

This interview was conducted in 2017 as part of 'Australian Cultural Fields: National and Transnational Dynamics' (ACF), an Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project (DP140101970). The project website is https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/acf/
The transcript was uploaded to the ACF website in October 2023.

Interviewee and position (at time of interview):
Edmund Capon AM, OBE, former Director, Art Gallery of New South Wales
Interviewer: Professor Ien Ang, Western Sydney University
Interview date: 22 February 2017 (first of two interviews)
Interview location: Art Gallery of New South Wales café
ACF field(s): Visual art
ACF 'line of inquiry': Transnationalism, multiculturalism line of inquiry

Edmund Capon died on March 13, 2019. The review of transcripts for publication on the Australian Cultural Fields website commenced in 2021. Mr Capon's transcripts, based on audio recordings, were reviewed on his behalf by his wife Joanna Capon OAM, and the ACF research team, and as such might read differently to something that Mr Capon would have edited himself.

The ACF research team expresses our sadness at Edmund's death and sincere sympathy to Mrs Capon. We are grateful for her permission to publish the transcripts, and for the knowledge she brought to her careful and considered review.

START

Ien Ang

Good. Well thank you Edmund for making the time, despite the fact that you're so busy.

Edmund Capon

It's a pleasure.

Ien Ang

Okay. Good. Well, you know, this is just a kind of a list of questions then to...

Edmund Capon

Well, why don't we, why don't we attack those first, and out of them other things will emerge.

Ien Ang

Yes, right. So first how...

Edmund Capon

How did I come to the Art Gallery of New South Wales?

Ien Ang

Yeah, yep.

Edmund Capon

Well let me tell you China was the reason I came. In 1974, there was a great archaeological exhibition that went to Paris and London towards the end of the cultural revolution, which was China's way of addressing what the west perceived to be its rather brutal regime and anticultural regime, and it had famous contents of course including the jade suits of Prince Liu Sheng and Princess Dou Wan from Mancheng. And I'd been to China in 1972, and I'd been there in '74, and I was involved in that exhibition, in the Petit Palais in Paris, and the Royal Academy in London. And I did a book called *Princes of Jade.* About three years later I was still at the Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A] in the Far Eastern Section. I was asked by the Australia Council if I could help them with a very similar exhibition that was coming to Australia in 1977 and '78. So I said "Yes, of course, delighted". And I came out to...

[Interruption by coffee service]

So what happened was they asked if I could write the catalogue, I agreed but in the end our Chinese colleagues decided to write the catalogue and I wrote a book called *Art and Archaeology in China*, which was published by Macmillan in Melbourne. And at that time, it was '77, the sponsors of the exhibition, which was Mobil Oil company, said "We'd like to invite you, because you've written this book, to come out for the opening of the exhibition in Melbourne". And I came out for a week, went to Melbourne, launched the book, did some lectures, did a lecture in Canberra, came to Sydney, gave a lecture, went back to my little attic in the V&A. Forgot all about Australia.

And literally some months later, I was approached by the New South Wales Agent-General in London, a man called Peter Valkenburg, he'd been asked to contact me by various people in Sydney, including the then Premier, Neville Wran. They'd heard I'd come and I'd given a lecture here, and they were very interested, and they were looking for a new Director, would I be interested? Completely surprised by this I said "I beg your pardon?", and they said "Well, come out and have a look". So I came out for three days, met the Premier, met the Ministers, met the Trustees, and for all kinds of reasons I decided, we decided that let's have a change of life from the ivory tower of the V&A to the more general area. Although Chinese art is my thing, I actually like everything, you know, I like old masters, I love contemporary art, and it was nice to be able to sort of change the dynamic a bit.

So that was how I came. And when I was formally interviewed by the Trustees, they were very interested in my Asian and particularly Chinese interests, because they knew that this was almost overlooked here, there was nothing, there was very, very little. And the arts of Asia were barely on the horizon of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, it had a very small gallery. And so it was China that bought me here. And then, once I sort of found my feet a bit, we immediately started work on one of the first really important Chinese exhibitions. And there were two people, two or three people involved in that, one was Mae Anna Pang, who is still the Curator of Chinese Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, who's absolutely wonderful, she's a great scholar of Chinese classical painting. And some people from the government, and somebody called Jean Battersby, who's now sadly dead, who was with the Australia Council. And they were very keen to develop and continue cultural relations with China.

Ien Ang

Was there a special reason for that? Was that because of the opening up of China?

Edmund Capon

Well, it was because – no, there was just a real interest. I mean, it was a political interest. There was considerable sort of political emphasis upon trying to do things with China. I'll come back to that in a moment, because a couple of years later there was a very specific reason. I should mention that when I came out in '77 for this very brief visit I launched this book I'd written, Stephen FitzGerald launched the book, he was then Australia's Ambassador in China. Terrific, wonderful, as you know, you know him. And so we immediately started on this exhibition of Chinese paintings. And there were two people who sort of eased the passage. One was Jean Battersby, Dr Jean Battersby from the Australia Council – the other was Bob Ellicott, who was then the federal Minister for something.

Ien Ang

We can check it later, yep. I don't know.

Edmund Capon

I can't remember whether it was – but anyway, he was involved...

Ien Ang

Not for the arts.

Edmund Capon

...and I do remember they were both in Beijing when we were up there, Mae Anna and I were up there, we had these meetings. And it was agreed with the Chinese, that we should do an exhibition of Chinese paintings. We wanted to do something different. And of course I don't think China had lent classical Chinese paintings outside China probably since the mid '30s with the great exhibition at Royal Academy. So certainly not in People's Republic days. And it was agreed, so we went and discussed it, and I said "Well, let's do the story properly, and let's begin with the Song and end with the Qing. Anyway, we argued about including a few Song and Yuan paintings, but that was not to be, so it was Ming and Qing paintings. From the 14th to the 20th century.

And they went to a number of museums, which were for sure not on the normal radar of lending to major exhibitions abroad. And I haven't got the catalogue here, but I've got a

list of all the museums who'd borrowed from around China. I mean, the principal lenders were Shanghai Museum, Suzhou, Nanjing, the Gugong of course. But there were a number, there were about 10 or 11 museums, and they gathered all these paintings to a hall on the west and rather neglected side of the Forbidden City. So Mae Anna and I, and a photographer, would toddle along there every now and then, daily, and very cold it was, and go through them, and slip out for moon cakes for lunch. But we spent a long time going through all the works and made a selection of 100 paintings. And in order to sort of sell it to a public who'd never really seen Chinese paintings, I mean, this was really new stuff.

Ien Ang

It's amazing, isn't it, yeah?

Edmund Capon

It was, to be honest, there were virtually no Chinese paintings – there weren't any in this museum, and Mae Anna had one or two in Melbourne. So it was very new territory. We thought about how to sell the show, I mean, we'd got all these amazing paintings, including one or two which are absolutely memorable, great Xu Wei paintings, a great Shitao, and Zhu Da, all these wonderful – and Dong Qichang, Gong Xian. Fantastic paintings. And they had never been out of China. And we thought "Well, here we are, we've got to sell this to the locals here". So it was called 'Treasures from the Forbidden City' or something, one of these completely sort of over the top titles. And it was sponsored by BHP, who were very good sponsors, because they were doing business in China, with mining and so on, so we approached them, and there was a man called Sir James McNeill who was the Chairman who got very involved, and we promoted the show well, it went around the country.

Ien Ang

So how did you sell it to the public?

Edmund Capon

Well, I think on the sheer rarity. Don't forget that four years previously they'd had this archaeological exhibition with the jade suits. So there was this sort of little star on the horizon. And here we were looking at a completely different, far more sort of reserved area – it was an exhibition that was quiet and thoughtful, and almost sort of intellectual

and aesthetic as opposed to the drama of the archaeological discoveries. So we sold it on the fact that firstly it was an incredible privilege to be able to see these pictures, which had never been out of China. And like most Chinese paintings, had spent most of their life rolled up. Chinese paintings, as you know, they're not hung up and left on the walls, they're brought out, read, rolled up and put away. So all great Chinese paintings have spent 99 per cent of their life rolled up. So you play on that, about the fact that here they are, they're coming out and they're going to be seen. And also the fact that China had never lent these things before, all this kind of thing. It was the rarity of the experience, and the privilege of the experience that was the strong selling point. And that's what we did. So it went from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane. So it went around the country. It was very easy to do, because, you know...

Ien Ang

People did come?

Edmund Capon

They did come, and I'll get the numbers. The organising body was then, this new one that was set up, and this was the first exhibition they'd done. It was set up by the federal government, and it laboured under the unbelievably cumbersome title of the International Cultural Corporation of Australia, which later metamorphosed into the rather more pertinent and succinct Art Exhibitions Australia, which still exists. They only do one big show a year. And it was set up by the federal government, so the show was indemnified by the federal government et cetera, et cetera. And I remember in the end that I went up to escort the first shipment, and we left the Forbidden City in a truck. And it was January or something, it was freezing cold, and I think I was sitting with the big blue boxes of paintings on the back of the truck. And we got to the airport, it was a Cathay flight, and we flew off to Hong Kong, the old airport in Hong Kong, where for some reason we had an unbelievably heavy landing.

Ien Ang

Oh dear.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, I know. And I thought "Oh my God, all the paintings are going to be...", anyway they weren't, they weren't. But of course it was quite easy, because I think we only had about

six big boxes, it was nice and easy. And it was evocatively designed, with a wood display cabinet, to give it a bit of a flavour of the Chinese or Asian aesthetic. Anyway, so that was the first, our first big show we tried, and very successful.

Ien Ang

So that was in 1970s...?

Edmund Capon

No, that was ’81, ’82.

Ien Ang

’81, ’82, okay, right.

Edmund Capon

And we should, we can get the catalogue, we must get – I didn’t bring the catalogues with me. The next one, after that, we kept our sights, all the other things that were going on here, and very firmly on China as well, and Japan too, to be honest. We were doing a lot with Japan as well. And I’ll come to that in a moment. But do you want to talk about China particularly or...?

Ien Ang

Well no, not specifically. Asia more generally, I’d say.

Edmund Capon

Well I think we should take a step back then, having gone that far. The one thing I did was create an Asian Department immediately. And put Jackie Menzies in charge. Then we looked at the resources here, in terms of the collection, and it was very small. And it was mainly from two sources. One was from Sydney Cooper, who was a rather eccentric Australian who lived mostly in England, whose money I think came from sheep dip or something like that, something mysterious like that. He collected Chinese art. And he had one very good object which I went to see him about in England which he finally gave to us, which was a big Song Dynasty Guanyin. And he had a lot of ceramics, mainly early ceramics, tomb figures, some of which were not right, and it’s always difficult telling somebody that they’re not okay, I knew because that’s something that I particularly studied.

And the other person was somebody called Hepburn Myrtle. Hepburn Myrtle was a businessman and a bit of a scientist too. A really delightful man who I knew before I came to Australia, because he's a member of the Oriental Ceramics Society in England. And he was a great collector. One of a very rare breed here in Australia of Chinese porcelains. He had a terrific collection, dating from Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing. And most of it's here now.

Ien Ang

It's in the Gallery being exhibited, or in collections?

Edmund Capon

In the collection. I think it's changed at the moment, but I used to have a lot of his stuff out. He was a very, very good collector, and really quite learned as well. And he had been a Trustee here too. And to be honest he was the only person on the Board who was interested in Asia. So we changed that by getting people on the Board like John Yu, Dr John Yu, and people like…
[Part 2]

Edmund Capon

So John Yu came on the Board, and somebody called Ken Myer, from the Myer department store family. And Ken was married to Yasuko, who was Japanese. So coming back to what were we going to do with our small corpus of material. We looked around and saw what everybody else was doing. Well, the National Gallery of Victoria was mainly collecting Chinese at that time. South Australia had a small collection of south east Asian material. And that's why when we decided upon founding the Asian Department to focus more on east Asia, and China and Japan in particular. And Ken and Yasuko Myer were the big funders of our Japanese collection.
Then we had two or three really good benefactors for China, and you will notice the Gallery in there is called the Edward and Goldie Sternberg Gallery of Chinese Art. And Goldie, whose son Michael is here right now, he lives in America, we play tennis together, Goldie and Ed are both dead now, but they were wonderful supporters of the Chinese collections, and all programs and everything else that we did. It was interesting though, it took a while to get the institution behind Asia. It really did. Because the Trustees, and basically the credo of the institution was still Eurocentric. It was very Eurocentric, it was extraordinary.

And that is why when we established the Asian Department, we decided to focus on east Asia. And we got some backing, we got one or two people, and the Myers particularly in Japan, but other people too, including Mr Idemitsu of the Idemitsu Museum, who I knew quiet well, and the oil company he owned. And they funded part of this as well as the Sternbergs. And so we really put a lot of emphasis. And gradually by putting people on the Board of Trustees, Asia became part of the institution. When I arrived, Asia was not part of the institution, it was a kind of afterthought, it was something in the cupboard, to be honest.

And the next sort of big event was one that really did lift the game altogether, because Australia established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic in 1973, and it was decided the 10th anniversary should be marked by a big event. Well, we decided that actually, and of course we saw it as an opportunity. And that was picked up. And it was decided that we should do something spectacular, which is why we had the entombed warriors, the Qin Shi Huang figures. I'll come back to that in a minute. And we actually did a show in China called 'Mood and Moment' of Australian painting, beginning with Streeton and Roberts and ending with Lloyd Rees and Olsen and Whiteley. So we did that, which I opened in Beijing, it was shown in Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai.

We thought that this would really be a spectacular event. And by chance I'd been in Xi'an in September 1974. And it was in March that year that the old pomegranate farmer managed to – I'll show you pictures of him, was digging a well in his pomegranate orchard to the east of the burial, and he was the man who discovered them.

Ien Ang

Okay, that's amazing.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, I met him in 1974. And I met him again recently. I met him three or four times.

Ien Ang

So he's still alive.

Edmund Capon

I'll show you. Let me show you. Let me show you a picture of him. There he is. Holding his certificate.

Ien Ang

Wow. Okay. That's amazing, huh?

Edmund Capon

This was taken in 2010. He's a miserable old bugger actually. He sits in the shop. He still lives in the same house, and this was inside his house. And signing the books to, you know. Anyway, what happened in 1974 was I was taking a group of people from England, one of the very first sort of cultural tours towards the end of the cultural revolution. And we were in Xi'an and I wanted to go to the Banpo Neolithic site, and they said "Alright, we'll take you there, but we'll also take you to the site of the Xi'an incident", you know, where they caught Chiang Kai-shek in his pyjamas. So we were there, and from there you can see Qin Shi Huang's tomb, easily. And I said "Can we go?". Anyway, he said "After visiting the Xi'an incident site we will take you to a site close by where they have found some archaeological pieces you might be interested to see".

So I don't think I've got the photographs on here, but they're in the catalogue which I published. We went, and there was this tiny fragment of an orchard, no bigger than where we are, with three holes in the ground and the heads sticking out, and that was all. Just a few holes in the ground, which turned into this huge thing. So that's when I had the idea, and said "Well, let's do a great show about this extraordinary discovery of the First Emperor's tomb, or his buried army. Which they hadn't done, China hadn't done. They had sent the odd figure in other shows to I think America and Europe. So I said "Let's do a show about this, and this alone". They were a bit alarmed about that, but they said "We agree". We got, I think 10 figures, nine or 10 figures, which was a big job, because they'd never travelled en masse. We got the Air Force, the Australian Air Force...

Ien Ang

Quite heavy, yeah.

Edmund Capon

...to fly them. And they flew them around the country as well – it opened in Melbourne, the National Gallery of Victoria, then came here, then Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, and then finally Canberra. And it was seen by about 1.2 million people around the country.

Ien Ang

That's quite amazing.

Edmund Capon

It was. I mean, that was, that was quite an event.

Ien Ang

That's an amazing development, obviously. Now, if we talk about the development let's say since then till now, you feel that Asian art is now more appreciated, or is it still...

Edmund Capon

Yes, it is definitely more appreciated, and it's definitely sort of...

Ien Ang

But it's still not mainstream.

Edmund Capon

Well, you're probably right. And it's amazing that it isn't. But I still think you're right. If you look at this building, for example. Now, in 1988 I built this, we built this part, and we opened this whole, we doubled the size of the building, and we built an Asian gallery. Although it is still quite small.

Ien Ang

Still quite small, yeah.

Edmund Capon

And then I had to get the Idemitsu oil company in Japan to pay for the fit out with the Sternbergs, because there wasn't enough money. They paid for it – because we wanted it designed in a particular aesthetic. So that was almost the first proper purpose-built Asian art gallery in an Australian art museum. Then in 2000 or whenever it was, I built this, the new one, which brought Asian art right up to the front of the building.

Ien Ang

Yeah, I remember that.

Edmund Capon

It's now used more for contemporary Asian art, which is fine up to a point, because you know, contemporary art is seen to be more relevant now.

Ien Ang

Is it, you think?

Edmund Capon

Yes. Which is a very fragile view.

Ien Ang

And of course like there is now in so much contemporary Chinese and other Asian art.

Edmund Capon

Yeah. Well, yes. I mean, there's a complete deluge of it. And that's understandable, because I remember seeing in about the late '80s, at the Meishuguan in Beijing what was a – excuse me a sec.
[Part 3]

Ien Ang

Yeah.

Edmund Capon

I had to see him.

Ien Ang

Maybe just to pick up, so Asian art is now more visible, more...

Edmund Capon

More visible.

Ien Ang

Especially the contemporary, maybe, you think?

Edmund Capon

Yes. And I think there's a danger in a way in that, you know, we've got White Rabbit, which is fantastic, it's brilliant. And we've got the MCA doing things, and here too, which is fine, it's fine. But contemporary art generally, and contemporary art of Asia is now the visible veneer of everything. And contemporary art is the icing that sits on the great cake of history and culture. And I think the icing is getting thicker and the cake is getting thinner, with the result that it is a fact, that you look at contemporary Asian, Chinese art for

example, you look at Cai Guo-Qiang, you look at Xu Bing, you look at – Ai Weiwei who is a classic example of an artist who's the consequence of that extraordinary depth of Chinese artistic history. You cannot really comprehend and appreciate contemporary Chinese art without the background of history.

So I would maintain that one should always have that cake of history, and you can have the performance of contemporary art on the top of that. And to be honest, I think that what's happened here to some extent with the Department of Asian Art has been absorbed into International Art. That is now sort of been occluded by this great icing of the contemporary world. I think that's a pity. Because...

Ien Ang

So an Asian historical approach.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, because the scholarship of the knowledge and the connoisseurship of the great traditions of Asian art are now I think diluted by the cause of contemporary Asia. Anyway, that's all, that's...

Ien Ang

Well, that's an interesting development, in a way, because...

Edmund Capon

Yeah. But it's all part of the evolution. But so the exhibition program in a sense is something that can address that, to some extent, which is good. But if you...

Ien Ang

I think that there was an exhibition maybe two years ago or something, I can't remember anymore, which tried to bring together the old and the new.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, you can do, yes, and that's fine, and also Yin did her Tang show just recently, which was lovely. But insofar as I think the Asian art has sort of now become part of the psyche of the institution, this institution, and the other ones. Melbourne, the National Gallery of Victoria particularly, it's got a very good presence – and the other interesting thing is that you look at the history of Asian art in the art museums here, it's there because it's been inspired, stimulated and injected by one or two private individuals.

Ien Ang

So who, who, kind of the advocacy of the active, yeah.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, the advocacy of the individuals. That's why it's been so hard to get it into the institutional psyche. It's been quite hard. It's happening, but to my mind it is still, it still doesn't have the presence in the institutional psyche that it should have. It still doesn't have that. And you talk to people, I mean, I talked to people, like Paul Keating about this, I mean, he was very strong. After he was got, you know, turfed out of being Prime Minister, he went into hiding for a year or two. The first interview he did ever was in our Asian gallery after that. Because this is important. So it's still I think slightly on the periphery in the institutional psyche.

Ien Ang

Yep. And also amongst the audiences, visitors?

Edmund Capon

Well, yeah, probably, probably. But that, I think the audiences respond now, because art museums are much more about activity than passivity, we've become performing monkeys, you know. And so the tendencies for the event program to be more visible...

Ien Ang

To take over.

Edmund Capon

...more visible and take over from the collections, which is wrong. Because the collection's the heart and soul and brain, you know. That's something which is happening. And it's something which I think the institutions have got to resolutely fight against. Because it means that you're becoming merely a stage, as opposed to a library. And I think that applies to Asian art. But it's still a fact that if you look at the National Gallery of Victoria, which I was saying has probably got the best Asian art collections, it's got a great champion in the [indistinct] in Japan, they've built a Japan gallery there. It's got some substantial benefactors that have helped the Chinese collections. And I think the same with South Australia. So the individuals outside the institution really played a very, very important role. That small band of genuine lovers of Asian art, they're the ones who have actually infiltrated the institutions bit by bit.

And then see Queensland's a very good example of what's happened. Doug Hall who's Director up there started the Asia Pacific Trienniale, which is a brilliant event, absolutely brilliant. It was his brainchild, and I think it's, yeah, to do it every three years, a big event, and firstly it puts Asian art into a much broader context. And obviously it's the contemporary field, but they had a small background collection as well, but they did have one or two people who really championed that. But the Asian collections everywhere have tended to rely on a few passionate individuals, and often outside the institution.

Ien Ang

So is that the same in let's say the UK, or the US?

Edmund Capon

No, it isn't really, no. I mean, for example where I was at the V&A, and in the British Museum for example, and the Ashmolean in Oxford, the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, and in Durham, Asian art began to be collected in the 19th century, and they've got amazing collections and great scholarship, and there's a great wellspring of learning and scholarship there, which it's still new here, and it still amazes me how hard it's been to break the thick ice of the Eurocentric sensibility.

Ien Ang

Is it indifference, is it ignorance, or is it resistance?

Edmund Capon

Well, I think one is the consequence of the other.

Ien Ang

Yeah, the rest, yeah...

Edmund Capon

I mean you could say, you could say the ignorance is a result of resistance. I think there is an element of that. I think it's still there, I really do. Even though there's a lot of lip service paid from the political and academic worlds about Asia, it's still, there's still this kind of – I don't know how to define it, but there's almost a Trump wall there.

Ien Ang

Right, right, right, right. So how do you compare the situation with Aboriginal art, for example, that has also gone through that?

Edmund Capon

Well, yes, but Aboriginal art is – there's this strange quest for two things, authenticity and history. And you know, Australia is longing to prove that it's got a very ancient culture. And Aboriginal art has provided the answer to that. And it's managed since the '70s, you know, we did the great Papunya show here in 2000, which was brilliant. And it showed that this ancient culture could have its utterly vital, living, contemporary career. Which has now been probably slightly exploited, let's put it like that. And diluted in that exploitation, to be honest.
[Part 4]

Ien Ang

So a cynic would say there has been an appropriation of Aboriginal art by the establishment.

Edmund Capon

Well, yes. Yeah.

Ien Ang

Like "This is our history" and things like that.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, yeah, of course.

Ien Ang

But Asian or Chinese art remains on the outer.

Edmund Capon

Well, of course. I mean, after all, you can't make a takeover bid for Chinese art, can you?

Ien Ang

No.

Edmund Capon

But that's why the contemporary Chinese art has become such a vehicle, because it is now embracing a kind of global aesthetic, in the same way that contemporary Aboriginal art is embracing a global aesthetic. You can show people contemporary Aboriginal works by Papunya artists or whatever, or Emily Kngwarreye, and people from France or

Germany, America or whoever can look at it and say "Well, I can appreciate it for its abstract values, for its aesthetic value". And in a sense, Chinese and Asian contemporary art's moving into those same realms. So you could argue that the specifics of their sort of long cultural identity, their deeply inscribed cultural identity is being diluted in sort of globalisation. And that's true. But it doesn't deny the fact that the roots are there, as Barry Humphries would say, going back to his roots, you've got your roots.

Ien Ang

But then the danger is that the appreciation remains at a very superficial level, by only looking at the contemporary.

Edmund Capon

Well, yes, I mean, there's certain – let me give you an example. In 1990, mid '90s, I don't know, '2, '3, '4?, we were moving on and we were growing Asia, I needed a proper, a full Curator of Chinese Art. Advertised throughout this country. Absolutely nobody. That's when I discovered you could not study Chinese art, or Asian art, in this country. That's when we started VisAsia. Then I also got Yang, you know, Liu Yang, from – do you know Yang? Who was our Curator of Chinese Art for 12 years? He's now Head of Asian Art at Minneapolis. And he came here, he was doing his doctorate where I went at SOAS in Daoist art. And he was brilliant, absolutely terrific. And his successor is Cao Yin of course. And yeah, we started to do the courses here, because you would have thought somewhere in Australia you could do proper studies of Asian art.

Ien Ang

There's only John Clark.

Edmund Capon

It's pathetic, frankly. It's absolutely pathetic. And we ran the courses here for a long time with Jackie, and we started the course, the Asian art courses in the small theatre, then we moved to the big one, and we ran them for 10 or 12 years. And people would study and get certificates. But it was the only sort of relatively formal Asian art historical course. And I don't know what's happened now with the universities, I actually don't know. But I was talking to the University of Sydney yesterday about things, and saying I cannot understand why, you know, you can't study contemporary Asian art, I suppose Judith Neilson is

starting that. That's fine, but you need more than that. It's like learning, as I say it's like learning to make the icing but not the cake. I'm frankly very disappointed about that.

Ien Ang

So that is a lack of serious interest.

Edmund Capon

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Ien Ang

So and now you're doing work for 4A, obviously, that's quite different. So how do you position an organisation like that?

Edmund Capon

Well no, 4A, I remember when it was set up, we were involved right from day one, and Melissa Chiu started it. And at that time, this was in '96 I think?

Ien Ang

Yeah, something like that, it was after Pauline Hanson, yeah.

Edmund Capon

And don't forget the interest in Asian art at that time was in small collections of the NGV, here, and a little bit in Queensland and a little bit in South Australia. And Canberra was collecting a little bit on a kind of horizontal of sort of Buddhist art, or religious art. But the contemporary, which was emerging very strongly from China and elsewhere in Asia was not really catered for. So that's how that started. And Melissa started it, and we were always involved in a kind of sort of modest way, doing things together. And now I hope we can sort of revitalise that a bit, yeah.

And what's interesting there of course, and I said this to the latest, the last board meeting, I said one of the things you've got to think about, and we've had that discussion here, is what is Asia? Because when we started the Asian Department here we were focused on east Asia, okay? China, Korea, Japan. Then Jackie [Menzies] got in here, and then South East Asia it's grown and it's grown and it's grown. Now the last, the 20th anniversary symposium 4A that we had at the University of Sydney last year, we had that speaker who talked about the show that she'd done of these Muslim artists...

Ien Ang

Yeah. It was central Asia.

Edmund Capon

Central Asia, North Africa. And north Asia. All the 'Stans. So now we've got to say well, is Asia really sort of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa right through Asia to Japan and Korea and Mongolia, and does it go from Kazakhstan to Bali? And I said to Michaela, I said "We've got to think about it", because at the moment, we're a tiny institution, but our image is reasonably well defined. Now, the bigger the frame, the harder it is...

Ien Ang

The harder, yes.

Edmund Capon

...to emphasise your image, and to make your image known in the public domain. We've got to think about this. I'm sure it's possible, I don't think we should overlook it.

Ien Ang

One of the – because I was at that session as well, the 4A event, 20 years...

Edmund Capon

Yeah. Oh of course you were, you were part of the discussion.

Ien Ang

I was there, and the history of that organisation was Melissa set it up in '96, in the wake of the Pauline Hanson rise, remember, so there was an anti-Asian...

Edmund Capon

Yeah, but I don't think that was the reason for it.

Ien Ang

It was not the reason, but it was a catalyst, I think.

Edmund Capon

Yes.

Ien Ang

Because a lot of the Asian artists in Australia felt...

Edmund Capon

Yeah, well, it was, and I remember, exactly, yeah. And I was dealing with a lot of them, and it was like when I got Lindy Lee for example to come on the Trustees here, and particularly – well, ever since John Yu and Ken Myer, I've always said we've got to have serious Asian interests, and that's something that's very weak on this Board now. It's a very Eurocentric lot at the moment. It's not good.

Ien Ang

That's very problematic, isn't it?

Edmund Capon

Yes.
[Part 5]

Ien Ang

So you still know everyone here?

Edmund Capon

Oh yeah.

Ien Ang

Well, that's good, isn't it, yeah?

Edmund Capon

It's nice.

Ien Ang

Yeah, well I, yeah, I won't, I won't...

Edmund Capon

We may have to continue, can...

Ien Ang

Yes, I won't keep you for too long. Because you've said a lot already. Just a few things...

Edmund Capon

We haven't finished though, we've got lots more to talk about.

Ien Ang

Yeah, absolutely we can do another time if you...

Edmund Capon

Yeah, no, I would like to do that.

Ien Ang

Yeah?

Edmund Capon

Because it's nice to talk about – I mean, you've got some interesting questions here, and you know, about the...

Ien Ang

Number two?

Edmund Capon

For example, I think John Howard in retrospect was actually a very good, even handed Prime Minister. But I remember one day going to see the Japanese Ambassador. We were doing a show, we did a lot of shows with Idemitsu, but also with [indistinct]. And you know how reserved and polite the Japanese are. So I go in to meet the Japanese Ambassador in his office in Canberra, and he barely makes the formal agreement before launching into something which was so un-Japanese, which was a kind of [an] attack as to why Mr Howard's government had withdrawn funding for Asian languages in schools. And it was so uncharacteristic for...

Ien Ang

Got it, yeah, someone like him.

Edmund Capon

...an Ambassador to do that, and to me. I mean, it was – so the question of government policies is something which again one is always fighting about, because governments tend to be not proactive but responsive now to perceived public opinion, which I think is an incredible weakness, a staggering weakness, because governments are not there just to

respond to perceived public opinion, because public opinion about the complexities of political, cultural, social, economic life are, as Brexit has shown, which is a classic example of a question that the electorate could not answer. It could not answer.

Ien Ang

No, indeed.

Edmund Capon

And so I find the sort of reactive form of government unbelievably depressing. And I think the same can be said of universities as well, in responding to economic opportunity as opposed to the fundamental requirements. Universities are not businesses. They are not businesses.

Ien Ang

No, but I think that's how we operate now, yes.

Edmund Capon

No, they should not, and they do not make, need not, nor should places like this. They go on about the business options. I said the business is irrelevant. Absolutely irrelevant. And the more you concede to that territory, the easier it is for the central funding agencies to walk away from their responsibility. As soon as you walk down that path you can see what's going to happen. Obviously they're going to say "Well, you can raise that money for me, you can do that", you just step away. The classic case, it's happening here now, they're going to get the idea that...

Ien Ang

This new modern...

Edmund Capon

...a university building should be partly publicly funded, and funded from private – Nonsense, absolutely. All the building I did here was government funded. I said "You fund the institution, I'll fund the programs". It's completely, totally and utterly wrong. And I would fight for it.

Ien Ang

So would you consider this then one of the major challenges for the sector, really, for the art sector?

Edmund Capon

Well, again, coming back to Asian Studies. It's not perceived to be so popular. But it's not a question about popularity, it's a question of what is important for now and for the future. And again, can you imagine any government in this country saying "Well, look, we think it's important to study Asian cultural history, we're going to fund some courses in the universities"? Ain't going to happen. It drives me crackers, frankly. And the cost of inserting funding into a university in Sydney, or a university in Melbourne, and one in Adelaide, whatever, for courses, serious courses for the study of Asian cultural histories, would cost a few, you know, I don't know what it would cost, but it would cost the price of one wing of one fighter aeroplane at most. I just find it so depressing. And it's that lack of belief in the abstract, you know? You know when DH Lawrence wrote *Kangaroo*, you know, the book …in it there's a sentence, a line, it sort of sums it up, it says "There's not an abstract thought between Darwin and Adelaide".

Ien Ang

So you think this is a particularly Australian problem then?

Edmund Capon

No, it's an increasing one everywhere, but because all agencies that have some perceived revenue raising opportunity are pressured to do it. And in a way that's fine, but that's another discussion which I would, you know, we can address again. But I think the problem lies in a real sort of basic belief that Asian Studies is important. And whether it's languages, cultural history, history, whatever, or contemporary history even...

Ien Ang

But the way Asian Studies is important now is because it will raise people's opportunities to make money in Asia, for trade, you know, completely transactional.

Edmund Capon

Well, it could be, it could be. But I don't think that – I would not use that as the argument for doing it.

Ien Ang

No, no, no, no. But I mean that's the only argument that you hear these days.

Edmund Capon

Well, you might only – the only argument you hear, but there's lots of other cogent arguments as well, which I think take precedence.

Ien Ang

Yeah, they should do.

Edmund Capon

They should do.

Ien Ang

They should do, yep.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, I feel very, very strongly about it. And I feel very, very, I feel really quite depressed about the lack of instinctive support, and the fact that even here in this institution, which we put so much effort into developing the Asian Department, the Asian interest, I think that's been diluted a bit now. But the VisAsia thing which we started 25 years ago now, you know, that's got a bit of energy. But it's still a sort of inconclusive interest if you like. And it's still not completely garnered into the fabric of the building, it's still a periphery. VisAsia in a way shouldn't need to exist. It should be there. It exists because it's not there in the fabric and the psyche of the institution.

Ien Ang

You might need to go, huh?

Edmund Capon

Can we meet again?

Ien Ang

We could, definitely, yeah. Let's do that.

Edmund Capon

There's a lot more to talk about.
[Part 6]

END

Edmund Capon (second of two interviews)

This interview was conducted in 2017 as part of 'Australian Cultural Fields: National and Transnational Dynamics' (ACF), an Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project (DP140101970). The project website is https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/acf/ The transcript was uploaded to the ACF website in October 2023.

Interviewee and position (at time of interview):
Edmund Capon AM, OBE, former Director, Art Gallery of New South Wales
Interviewer: Professor Ien Ang, Western Sydney University
Interview date: 2 March 2017 (second of two interviews)
Interview location: 4A Centre for Contemporary Arts Centre (initially) and China Cultural Centre, Sydney (subsequently)
ACF field(s): Visual art
ACF 'line of inquiry': Transnationalism, multiculturalism line of inquiry

Edmund Capon died on March 13, 2019. The review of transcripts for publication on the Australian Cultural Fields website commenced in 2021. Mr Capon's transcripts, based on audio recordings, were reviewed on his behalf by his wife Joanna Capon OAM, and the ACF research team, and as such might read differently to something that Mr Capon would have edited himself.

The ACF research team expresses our sadness at Edmund's death and sincere sympathy to Mrs Capon. We are grateful for her permission to publish the transcripts, and for the knowledge she brought to her careful and considered review.

START

Edmund Capon

I think I mentioned to you that when Paul Keating two or three years after he was deposed he did his first interview, and he decided it would be in the Asian Gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. That's where he did it and it was for the very simple reason that he was determined to put Asia firmly on the map and China in particular to be honest as a recognition that there was a huge amount of – Japan loomed large in the Australian psyche and as you know then sort of went off the rails a bit. And I think I mentioned to you another little moment that I remember with the Japanese Ambassador, you know, we've done that so we don't have to worry…

Ien Ang

Yeah

Edmund Capon

And as I say, I think it surprises me how reluctant Australia is to make an open commitment to Asia. What I mean an open commitment – and it comes back to what I was saying earlier about getting Asia into the psyche of the institution of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Everybody said it's political, academic and business, well it says these things but the heart you feel is not in there [indistinct]

Ien Ang

And if they have done something then they're like, 'Okay, we've done that.'

Edmund Capon

Exactly, 'We've done it.' You know? And it's a relationship that is built on pragmatism rather than any profound feelings, any profound commitment. I feel there's no cultural commitment and actually I still feel that. I'm really surprised to say it but I still feel that, and you know, whether it's South East Asia, India, China, Japan, wherever, Korea, there's still this reluctance and it reminds me of something I said about the evolution of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which was founded you know, 1890s. Actually, it's longer than that, it's 1872 I think, so it's coming up close to 150 years old. And it's grown by what I call reluctant stealth.

Ien Ang

Reluctant stealth.

Edmund Capon

It's only more recently that it's had this positive urge to do things, it's all – you know, you look at the building, the physical building, you could see it sort of with great anxiety and pain it's got a new bit, then another new bit, and it doesn't feel as though it's happened with unbridled enthusiasm somehow! It's going on right now, isn't it? As Paul Keating pointed out last night there's this new white paper on foreign relations or whatever it is and it seems that the commitment to America and i.e. to the western cultural dominance is still there, which is fine, there's no problem with that. I mean after all this is, you know, it's a pretty mixed culture and it's built on the fundaments of western and European credentials. But I found that even in Europe and America there was certainly a greater cultural and academic commitment to study Asian art than here, and that is surprising as I think that's still the case. For example, if you want to really study Chinese paintings, the history of Chinese painting, you can't do it here, you have to go to Princeton or Berkeley or SOAS [School of Oriental and African Studies]. If you want to study Asian art properly you cannot do it in Australia and I think to me that is just staggering, after all the hubris that's gone on, a staggering gap. I really feel that strongly.

Ien Ang

So, what you are saying is the lack of serious interest in Chinese and Asian art relates to…?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, I'm looking from a slightly prejudiced point of view, from my own point of view about Asian art studies. But Asian art studies means more than just that, you know, if you're going to do that you've got to have the background of history, the background of historical evolutionary sentiment, the background of language, you've got to have those things. So, to study Asian art in isolation of the history and culture is to merely study a pot.

Ien Ang

Right. So, and last time we talked about the rising, or really the increasingly popularity of contemporary Asian art, but not Asian art, contemporary art in general.

Edmund Capon

Across the board, yeah.

Ien Ang

Across the board. What impact does that have you think on following the arts?

Edmund Capon

Well I think it's an interesting sort of conundrum at the moment because there's absolutely no doubt that the world of historical art has been obfuscated by this great thick layer of contemporary icing and there's no doubt about that, and it's across the board. It even happens to some extent with South East Asia and particularly with Japan and Korea, India even. And you know, we go to somebody like Rossi & Rossi who are really terrific dealers, they're Italians who started in Italy and London and they're great dealers in Himalayan Arts.

Ien Ang

Yeah.

Edmund Capon

And fabulous materials. But now, you know, he's dealing almost mainly in contemporary Tibetan and Nepalese though. So, it's interesting how the contemporary world has completely taken over. And that's fine, I've got no problem with that, but again you know, the art of every culture, every society, is the product of the history of this. And if you don't have an appreciation and maybe a little bit of knowledge of the journey then you're never really going to be able to fully comprehend the meaning of the contemporary world.

Ien Ang

So would you say that the interest in contemporary art which is mostly young people I think…

Edmund Capon

Yeah, I think it distorts the story a bit, yeah. But it's easier where – see, obviously what's happened, and this is really quite recent, the last five decades really, the last half century where art has become a kind of horizontal factor as opposed to a vertical factor, i.e. so much contemporary art has not lost its sort of cultural roots but they've been sort of diluted. And you know, contemporary Chinese art now speaks globally, contemporary Indian art

speaks globally, you know, Kusama, Japanese art, these artists, their work speaks globally as opposed to, you know, vertically.

And inevitably dilute – well we talked last time about an artist, like you know, the best known contemporary Chinese artists like Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang, and who's the one who does the bloodline series? Zhang Xiaogang. You know, these artists working in a style and an aesthetic that still portrays its heritage fairly strongly but actually speaks in a language that is…

Ien Ang

Understood globally.

Edmund Capon

Yeah. And in fact, it's very much like the Papunya Tourist Store, you know, when the Papunya movement emerged in the '70s it produced an abstract language which didn't prejudice its heritage but became a visual language. We didn't understand necessarily the iconography of it but we could appreciate the visual aesthetic of it. And in a way I think that's true, like Zhang Xiaogang for example. So, there's no problem with it but it's the fact that it seems to be because it's becoming more universal I suppose, it seems to be detaching itself slightly from the tradition from which it grew.

But at the same time, you know, I've always said this, that art is the great communicator, and I remember another little sort of moment when in about 1983 or 1984 at the Art Gallery we developed a policy for Asian art and informed the department and it was primarily to focus on East Asia, China, Korea, Japan. And so I sat the Trustees down and I have to be honest, it wasn't their territory at all and I realised I had to do something. And we did have a particular focus on Japan as well because we had a benefactor in Ken and Yasuko Myer and nobody else in Australia was really focusing on Japan. So, all I did was I merely showed them a pair of Japanese screens which were, you know, early 18th century Japanese, Maruyama Okyo screens of cranes. Now, this was a language that spoke to anybody. Anybody, even they, could look at that and say, you know, this is sublime and beautiful, exquisite, you know, the balance of the – and that wonderful study of symmetry of the Japanese composition. So, you know, obviously it speaks to everybody but it doesn't alter the fact I am still unconvinced by this country's commitment to Asia, sad to say.

Ien Ang

So, what do you think will happen in the future from now on?

Edmund Capon

Well I think this is not a process of simply opening the door and crossing the street and doing it. This is a process of almost reluctant evolution. I mean obviously, you know, it's in progress and the progress, like so many things, it's two steps forward, one step back. But I'm still surprised at how slow it is, I must admit.

Ien Ang

So, and it's quite interesting to contextualise it in the fact that Australia has become much more multicultural, many more Asians living in Australia, but that doesn't necessarily have…

Edmund Capon

No it doesn't necessarily translate into it interestingly enough, and that's an interesting question of why is this the case? Well, I think a number of reasons, but there's no doubt – let's go back to the late '90s when the Republic debate was on, okay? And there was a 'no' to changing the [Constitution] – probably because the question was loaded in such a way to ensure that that answer came out. But it was interesting, because I remembered going and asking some people, particularly the Chinese community who all voted for…

Ien Ang

For Howard, no?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, to not change.

Ien Ang

Yeah, for the Monarchy.

Edmund Capon

Their reasoning was, we came here to adopt the ways and means of this place and the stability here and the last thing we want to do is change. So, in a way you can see why the Asian communities here have not been in the forefront or the vanguard of changing

things, and perhaps not even been in the vanguard of changing attitudes either. Because, you know, they came here to get away from that kind of thing.

Ien Ang

Yeah, but I remember the Buddha exhibition, you did one I think 2003 or something.

Edmund Capon

'3 or '4, yeah.

Ien Ang

When the Art Gallery was trying to connect with Asian communities, so that is kind of a particular way of working…

Edmund Capon

Oh yeah, no we did, but I mean we did it through all the Buddhist communities and Buddhist temples and it had to coincide with a great sort of Buddhist convention here. And it was very funny, the opening. Because we had all these groups of monks from various countries, and we think that Buddhist monks are tranquil and kind and polite and serene, well on the opening night there was sort of a certain hierarchy to the event and there were groups of monks pushing the others out of the way to get to the head of the queue and pushing this way and pushing that way. It was very funny! And there were a lot of nuns as well. All these delegations who were around the…

Ien Ang

And they want to be part of the action.

Edmund Capon

Absolutely, they were all pushing and shoving, it was like a football crowd! [Laughs]

Ien Ang

[Laughs] But I mean the key issue here is that promoting Asian art or Chinese art, you actually can't rely on the Chinese community to spearhead that.

Edmund Capon

No, I think it's up to us to do that and embrace the Chinese community or the other communities as well, and the Indian community particularly. I mean we've done the shows

with India at the Gallery and probably the Chinese community is the most overt and willing cooperative sort of group.

Ien Ang

They've been longer here also.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, exactly, yeah. I mean there's pretty substantial traditions there, so…

Ien Ang

Yeah, so this has something to do with this issue of cultural diversity, multiculturalism more broadly…

Edmund Capon

Because that's the other thing. Now, this is another thing, which is another sort of fundamental – we sort of talked about Asia, you know, and Asia is actually half the world and the idea that you can sort of lump Asia to…

Ien Ang

All Asians together, yeah.

Edmund Capon

Is, again, that's another…

Ien Ang

It's an Australian bias I think, no?

Edmund Capon

Well it is, but it does exist elsewhere, you know, Asia tends to be sort of, you know, there and Asia is as hugely diverse as the western world, perhaps even more so in fact.

Ien Ang

It's certainly much larger.

Edmund Capon

In fact I suppose it could be said that the re-emergence of Islam has been one of the things that's actually brought this home, that Asia is not a unified group of any kind at all, it's a great sort of cultural conglomerate. And the idea that, you know, we've got to recognise

that if we're going to really understand Asia you need pockets of specialisation, you know, to understand the Islamic world, to understand the Chinese world, to understand the Indian world, to understand the Central Asian world. I mean even East Asia, you know, when you talk about China, Korea, Japan and Mongolia, you're talking about cultures which might have some common ground, you know, deep in the earth.

But there are some real differences which you can recognise…. I mean it happened to me at the Gallery you know, you're sort of "Asia" aren't you and therefore you are supposed to know everything about Asia. It was that strange.

I'll tell you a little story. When I was thinking about having been asked to come to Australia to do the job I was still at the Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A] and I was thinking about it. And one day we were right at one end of the V&A, which is a huge museum, and I had a little cubby hole there and I was right at the other end of the building, you know, it was just a 15 minute walk away. I was looking for a little exhibition in the V&A of modern American watercolours by people like Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kline and all these designs. It was a smallish gallery and I was actually looking at a watercolour by Helen Frankenthaler, you know, New York schooled painter of the '70s and '80s who I always liked. Anyway, the head of that department walked through, a man called Dr Michael Kelton, and I was looking at this modern American water colour. He said, 'Hello Edmund! What are you doing here?' I said, 'I'm looking at this Michael.' He said, 'But you're Asia aren't you?'

Ien Ang

Oh god! Isn't it terrible?

Edmund Capon

So, the idea is you get compartmentalised and the idea that I couldn't possibly be interested in looking at a modern American because I was doing Chinese Buddhist art and things on the other side of the building, on the other side of the world!

Ien Ang

So, in terms of the influence now of Chinese artists who are based in Australia, what kind of influence do they have?

Edmund Capon

I had this interesting talk to [indistinct] yesterday down at the Vermilion about the issue of there are very few Chinese artists who got sort of inserted into the general community here. You could arguably say that Shen Jiawei has a bit because, you know, he's a history painter and Zhong Chen has to some extent. But generally speaking, you know, you look at the other artists, they're still speaking to their…

Ien Ang

Little community?

Edmund Capon

Little community, yeah.

Ien Ang

So, is that because of them or is it because of the mainstream not receptive?

Edmund Capon

Because of us.

Ien Ang

Right.

Edmund Capon

I think. I mean this is what 4A does so well because it's in the contemporary arena, it does actually talk to the community of contemporary aficionados and there's absolutely no doubt, coming back to what we were saying earlier, that contemporary art is much more horizontal. But when you do a big spectacular show there's no doubt that you can draw huge crowds for the sort of sheer spectacle, the theatre, the drama of it. And you know, I think the first Emperor show was probably one of them, in terms of the number of visitors – I think that that and Picasso both did 350-400,000 people. That's an awful lot of people to come to an exhibition. But if you do something more esoteric – let's give you another example, I did a big exhibition with the Bunkacho…

Ien Ang

The what?

Edmund Capon

The Bunkacho, which is the Japanese Cultural Ministry, on screens and the seasons and all that. It was a beautiful show, but it was a hard sell to the public because, you know, you could probably still go out there…[indistinct], say 'Japan' and what comes into people's minds would be World War 2, Sony, Toyota and…

Ien Ang

Businessmen.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, and exports or something. So, and just China, if you mention the word China in Australia generally it's not a cultural image that pops up in people's minds.

Ien Ang

No, especially not now.

Edmund Capon

No, especially not now, and I suppose that's true around the world but I'm not sure. I remember when I was studying at the School of Oriental Studies, the image of China then which was in the late '60s and '70s was obviously Mao and the Cultural Revolution but, you know, the instinct was an ancient civilisation actually. It really was. I'm not quite sure if that would be the case today.

Ien Ang

Probably not, especially because in China itself maybe.

Edmund Capon

Yeah I know, but China's…

Ien Ang

You know, economic growth has become so…

Edmund Capon

Can we…?

Ien Ang

Yes, okay…

[Part 2]

Ien Ang

So, I think you said some interesting things while we were walking over so maybe we can talk about that?

Edmund Capon

Okay.

Ien Ang

About the market for Asian art, you're suggesting that you still have to be in New York or perhaps in London?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, I think it's true, and I just commented about a particular collection of Asian art that was assembled by a collector in Melbourne and it had some interesting pieces. It was a lot of Buddhist material, some from China, some Cambodian, South East Asian pieces, a Japanese piece and a couple of paintings. Paintings is another realm, we'll come to paintings in a bit because that's another realm. And he had some ceramics and other things. And it was decided he wanted to sell his collection and went to an Australian auctioneer called Mossgreen, who are Melbourne based, and so they had this very distinctive Asian art collection to sell. They took it and displayed it in London and in Hong Kong, brought it back here, and I did a talk when it was on display at their auction rooms and galleries here in Queen Street in Sydney. It was shown in Melbourne and Sydney. The sale took place in Sydney and I don't think any of the works that sold stayed in Australia. I can check that with the auctioneer, Paul Sumner, who runs Mossgreen.

Ien Ang

So, when was this?

Edmund Capon

About a month ago.

Ien Ang

So, early 2017?

Edmund Capon

You can look it up, it's Raphy Star, Mossgreen, and there's a big catalogue, you can look at it, it's quite clear that there's some quite interesting works of art there. And I gave a little talk about some of them and picked out one or two things. But on the whole it was relatively special in the sense that it was somebody who really appreciated the Asian aesthetic and the Buddhist interest and the Chinese – you know, there were some very good Chinese ceramics, one or two good Song ceramics, a couple of paintings and some Buddhist sculpture from China and elsewhere.

To be honest I don't think it was a huge sort of hit financially but I think it was okay, but I don't think it was spectacular. One or two pieces sold well but clearly if you talk about Asian art collecting I don't know anybody in Australia who is now seriously collecting Asian art as a private collector apart from one or two people, some people in Melbourne collect Japanese art and they have their own little Japanese museum. Parts of the Myer family buy Japanese art, but really there's – there were one or two collectors here. Dr John Yu had a wonderful collection of ceramics and textiles.

And there was a wonderful man called Hepburn Myrtle who died a few years ago, maybe 20 years ago now, who was a businessman and a scientist and he had a wonderful collection of imperial Chinese porcelain which he gave to the Art Gallery. But it's very interesting about the fact there are people here in Australia who will buy contemporary Asian art but I barely know anybody who collects more traditional and historical art. It's really interesting and it does say something about the contemporary culture, that believing that only contemporary art is relevant, and nothing is further from the truth particularly in the arts of Asia.

Ien Ang

Yep, and collecting Aboriginal art is a much bigger activity?

Edmund Capon

Yeah it's a bigger activity, yeah it is. And you know, people who collect contemporary art generally will always have some Aboriginal art. But that's an understandable commitment to the place in a way I think, which I think we probably all understand that.

Ien Ang

So…

Edmund Capon

So, to what extent and how has the global context been significant for limits in Australian art museums?

Ien Ang

Yes?

Edmund Capon

Well, it's sort of an interesting question that, because when they were founded, the state galleries - - -

[Interruption]

When they were founded, the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne was the first to be founded and the Art Gallery of New South Wales was founded in 1872 or something, and the others, you know, they were very Euro-centric, very Euro-centric. And you know, I've written about this in the Asian art handbook about the beginnings of it and this – what happened in Sydney was probably sort of coloured the way things happened because the first Asian art acquisitions in the New South Wales Art Gallery were there as a consequence of the international exhibition that had been held here, and you know, there were objects of contemporary manufacture then, so they went into the collection.

So, you know, there's always been the, you know, the contemporary world has been represented. But of course, the museums and the Trustees of the Museum and the friends of these museums wanted to reaffirm – they virtually all had European backgrounds and they wanted to reaffirm the European sensibilities which is why the Art Gallery of New South Wales looks like a British museum, I mean it's a neoclassical building.

Ien Ang

It's still colonial in that sense.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, exactly, and it was all about affirmation and giving a sense of certainty. So, the art they collected was there to substantiate their presence here and to substantiate their inherited cultural values, sensibilities and traditions. So, you know, Asia was out of that particular vision and really in terms of Asian art collecting here the National Gallery of Victoria has by far the best overall collection and particularly in China and Japan. Sydney has a good collection and a more varied collection now. And the other interesting thing is

what material did they collect. Now, if you look at the manufactured arts of ceramics and textiles and lacquers and things like that, there's a very strong representation, or relatively strong. Paintings is another dimension.

Ien Ang

Oh yeah, we're going to talk about this.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, painting and calligraphy, you cannot comprehend and appreciate Asian and particularly Chinese and Japanese painting and calligraphy without a feeling for the language and calligraphy and all the constituent parts. You can collect Chinese porcelain as objects, you can't collect Chinese paintings as objects. Because a Chinese painting is a written statement, so you've got to know the language. I'm not saying necessarily the language, you've got to understand the pictorial language, which means a lot more than just how this nice little pot was made and what it's made of and when it was made.
So, it actually is inevitably a scholarly pursuit and Melbourne, because of Mae Anna Pang, has a really impressive collection of classic Chinese paintings and literati paintings, it really does and Sydney does not and nowhere else in Australia has. The very few classical Chinese paintings in the whole of Australia. I mean, I've got a few at home…

Ien Ang

I'm just looking at this book here, it's a beautiful book this one.

Edmund Capon

Where's that from?

Ien Ang

Well, it's a Chinese collection of traditional Chinese paintings from around the world.

Edmund Capon

You see, if you want to study Chinese painting, as I think we said earlier, you go to Princeton or Berkeley or the School of Oriental [and African] Studies [SOAS] or something like that, where the interest was much more about the culture and the history and the intellectual history as opposed to the pragmatic history of making objects. So, and it's quite interesting, people who study the arts of China, there are not many scholars who

actually embrace ceramics and painting for example. Painting and calligraphy is a very sort of identified and distinctive tradition and a very distinctive group of scholarship too.

Ien Ang

So, we're talking here very much about connoisseurship…

Edmund Capon

Yes.

Ien Ang

Have you had experience explaining Chinese art let's say to the general public?

Edmund Capon

Yeah of course.

Ien Ang

And what kind of experience is that?

Edmund Capon

Well, when we started VisAsia we also started a series of lectures which was the only course you could actually study Asian art history. And so I did lots of lectures about mainstream traditions of Chinese art, whether it be sculpture or ceramics and the decorative arts and textiles and lacquer and jade. And then sometimes I divided up like for example I did one on the aesthetics of the Song Dynasty so you could embrace their simplicity of form and that aura of restraint. We did lots of lectures about Chinese painting. You know, you could cover quite a lot of territory like that and it wasn't specifically chronological, it wasn't necessarily specifically about ceramics or about jade or about this… We tried to do it in such a way that we put all these various media into the context of their time. But again we did treat painting calligraphy differently because that's its own journey in a way.

Ien Ang

So it will take a long time to learn to appreciate it, yeah.

Edmund Capon

Actually it might be quite interesting to go back from – I've forgotten when we started, the Asian art courses. I think firstly we did the arts of China, then the arts of Japan, then the

arts of India and then we did more specific things. But to look at those courses, because we started them in a small theatre which held 90 people. Jackie Menzies was absolutely sort of crucial to this program and Ann MacArthur too. And I think probably we did most of the lectures but by no means all. We got people like Jim Masselos to come in and talk about India and John Clark came and all these – yeah we got lots of people.
But it grew and after a couple of years it moved to the big theatre because it was every Tuesday or something, I can't remember. You know, we'd have a couple of hundred people coming to the courses and most of them did the whole course. I think it was one of the most valuable things we've…

Ien Ang

It's not there anymore is it?

Edmund Capon

No, they're trying to get it going. I mean Warwick Johnson [indistinct] you could say are trying to get it going again now and they're doing a series of one-off lectures with The University of Sydney which is good. They've got the first one fairly soon, it's on a Japanese thing, I've got it here somewhere. Which is good but these are sort of one-off lectures and what that gives you – and I think I said it last time, what's needed is a proper course that people can sort of follow things through.

Ien Ang

That's all right, you'll find that later.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, look them up because they really are – I think I might have deleted it because I'm not going to be here. I think the other thing I should add is that what we found was that because interest is inspired by contact more often than not and with relative ease of travel people were going from Australia to South East Asia and there's no doubt that there was a lot more interest in the arts of South East Asia because it was sort of more readily available in a way and I know a lot of people who've got a bit of Thai art and a bit of Indonesian art on textiles and Khmer material.

Ien Ang

That's true, yeah.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, because I felt that happened because of – this was almost the most immediate physical contact with Asia. That might not be the case but I think it had something to do with it.

Ien Ang

That's a very interesting point.

Edmund Capon

I think it had something to do with it, yeah.

Ien Ang

That's a very interesting point, in that might be a by-product of tourism though.

Edmund Capon

That's what I'm saying, yeah. I remember when I started with the Gallery, so we're talking early '80s, there was one of the women working in the administrative department and she was probably in her early to mid-20s and she was going on her first overseas holiday. Now, the tradition was you went to Europe. Cheap airfares made travel possible for a lot of people who couldn't do it before. And of course they look at what they can afford and Asia was the nearest destination. So, her first overseas holiday, I remember talking to her about it, it fascinated me, you know, her notion of going overseas was not to Europe but was actually to Thailand.

Ien Ang

Yep, and of course you learn something, Thai dance and the temples and things like that.

Edmund Capon

It made me realise that, you know, travel, tourism has played its part.

Ien Ang

Yep. So, I really won't keep you that long anyway. Let's just return to this, and then maybe until midday and that's it.

Edmund Capon

Yes.

Ien Ang

So, we talked briefly while walking about the emergence of smaller galleries of modern Chinese art in Sydney, but maybe Australia more broadly, Vermilion Art and this other place you mentioned ….

Edmund Capon

[indistinct] But there are very few Australian Asian art dealers.

Ien Ang

So they were all setup by the Chinese migrants right?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, well it seems so now but that was not the case interestingly. There was somebody here – I'll think of his name – there were one or two people and I'd actually bought Sino Tibetan bronze from a dealer who's now no longer here and some Song ceramics from – I've forgotten his name, but they've stopped. The only Asian art dealers I know deal with contemporary. One possible exception, and she's called Leslie Kehoe who did some Japanese art, and she's a little stalwart. I don't know anybody like her but she's managed to keep going. But I don't know of an Asian art dealer in Sydney.

Ien Ang

No, doesn't exist. So, that tells you something.

Edmund Capon

Yeah, I mean as you say, art has – but there are no European old master dealers in the industry.

Ien Ang

That's true. So, that means that the Australian art market is actually quite small still.

Edmund Capon

It's small and contemporary.

Ien Ang

And contemporary, yes.

Edmund Capon

And probably 70 per cent of it is focused on Australian art too.

Ien Ang

And including Aboriginal art.

Edmund Capon

Yeah.

Ien Ang

That's it.

Edmund Capon

You think of this big wide global world people would look a little bit more with a slightly more gregarious attitude but it seems not. Like I said, I honestly don't know of any real collectors of Asian art, of traditional Asian art.

Ien Ang

So, but then as you say, maybe not even of European artists.

Edmund Capon

No, there's nobody buying old master pictures here that I…

Ien Ang

No, so the question, to what extent is the art market now globalised? Your answer is not so much, because it's still quite focused on Australia?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, it is, and there's a small group of collectors of international art who, you know, the John Kaldors, the Naomi Milgroms, the Ainsworths and people who buy – Simon Mordant who collected major art from around the world, but they all are active in the contemporary arena. There is Kerry Stokes who buys a little bit more broadly. James Fairfax did the old masters but he's just died so that's stopped. I mean, I don't know. I know one person I think here in Sydney who occasionally buys an old master painting. It is very contemporary. But it is this kind of current attitude that only the contemporary is relevant. Whenever you hear that word relevant applied to the art world, close the door and leave, because you know you're going to hear a lot of waffle.

Ien Ang

[Laughs] So, in which context would people say that?

Edmund Capon

Well they would say it about the simple fact that if it doesn't reflect the way we live now and the way we are now, it has no relevance. I mean it is the biggest load of nonsense you can possibly hear, and it comes out about what is a modern, what is a contemporary painting. Well, and I think I told you – did I tell you about Brett Whiteley?

Ien Ang

No.

Edmund Capon

Well, Brett loved Chinese calligraphy and all that but on the door of his studio which the Gallery runs and it's still there a postcard 'this big' [gestures size] of a painting made in about 1490s by Piero della Francesca and it's called the Baptism of Christ and it's in the National Gallery in London. And this – it was Brett Whiteley's favourite painting and it is still there. Now, Brett was absolutely an artist of his place, his time, he did everything, all over the place, you know, drugs, Bob Dylan, painting, you know, the lot…and it happens to be a painting that I love as well and I used to see him a lot and we'd talk about this and he said, 'That painting is as modern as mine.' But these people who can't see it, you know, they put this thing up and all they know is how much it cost.

Ien Ang

Yeah, so that's also a sign of the times, that it's all about money.

Edmund Capon

Shocking, boring!

Ien Ang

Right, what else can we talk about, let's see…

Edmund Capon

I think one of the things here that we might touch on is the sort of how the museums are dealing with it, like MCA, GOMA and MONA, and smaller places like 4A. I mean I would

like to say that I think one of the greatest initiatives was what The Queensland Art Gallery have done …

Ien Ang

The APT [Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art] or…?

Edmund Capon

The APT have absolutely stolen the ground from everybody else and it's a terrific event and it's now known around the world. Nobody else is doing something like this. It was one of the greatest initiatives, obviously it deals with the contemporary and but as a kind of panorama of contemporary creative activity in Asia, there is no event like it in my mind. I think it's terrific.

Ien Ang

There are now so many biennales and triennials?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, but the other thing that's happening, because there are biennales popping up all over the world from Istanbul to Sao Paulo, to Korea, Japan, and that's been the other great vehicle for modern and contemporary Asian art. I mean, you know, 20 years ago if you went to the Venice Biennale which was just the most renowned, you wouldn't see Asian art. Now of course you do and the countries have their own pavilions, but also contemporary Asian art activity is absolutely part of the big worldwide game, so it's there. For example, in the Venice Biennale – it comes on this year, maybe the one two years ago, the German pavilion had a huge work by Ai Weiwei.

Ien Ang

That's interesting.

Edmund Capon

Or was it French, it was one of them and I thought, what the hell's that doing here? And so the biennales, this endless parade of biennales have become real vehicles for the visibility of contemporary Asian art, absolutely no doubt about that. And now of course to the commercial art phase, like you know, Basel and Hong Kong Basel and Miami Basel or whatever it says…

Ien Ang

So, do you think in terms of the art fares, the biennales, there is a shift of much more activity in Asia itself…?

Edmund Capon

Yes, no doubt about it.

Ien Ang

In China?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, no doubt.

Ien Ang

The region…?

Edmund Capon

Yeah, no doubt about it. Because the other thing that's happening is, you know, this again is a recent – probably the last 30 years, that Asian artists are mobile and as you know – I mean I know that Chinese artists, you know, we all know Zao Wou-ki but these are more contemporary Chinese artists living in Paris, living in London. Xu Bing was living in New York for a while. They're much more mobile. So, they've actually become part of a global community of artists as well. And again, these things – but nothing changes overnight.

Ien Ang

So, you're saying that Chinese artists and maybe other Asian artists are mobile, going to western centres, right?

Edmund Capon

Yes, because in an odd way they're still seen as the art centres. A lot of Chinese artists still think that Paris is still the spiritual home of art. Of course, that's a bit of nonsense really. And they see that the art world and the art market and the art history, art studies, art scholarship more as a western tradition too. And this is again, take Liu Yang, who worked for us, our Chinese curator. Yang came from Hangzhou and studied in Beijing. He did his doctorate at the School of Oriental Studies in London and then came to us.

Because it is a fact that art studies scholarship in most Asian countries is simply not an advanced topic.

Ien Ang

No.

Edmund Capon

Not to the extent [indistinct]

Ien Ang

So, for example, I went to a very interesting symposium at the Singapore Art Museum in January about biennales and there were a lot of curators from Shanghai, from Korea, many parts of Asia. There is a lot of activity like that and at Shanghai Biennale especially their ambition is to be the best biennale in the world. I mean, this is what they're saying, right? But this is all not particularly associated with an increase of the scholarship of the art.

Edmund Capon

Oh no, not at all. No, it's all about visibility…

Ien Ang

The spectacle.

Edmund Capon

The spectacle. And we live in a, you know, 'look at me' age. Most of the art is 'look at me'. One of the great saving graces of much contemporary art is that it's not invested or intended to have immortality. Thank god!

Ien Ang

Well, there is so much of it.

Edmund Capon

Most of it is destined for fairly immediate disposal and destruction.

Ien Ang

Well that's an interesting point actually isn't it?

Edmund Capon

I've always said, I love Christo's work. I've always been a great fan, I like him, he's a wonderful artist and I think he did one of – art the greatest service by saying it is impermanent.

Ien Ang

So, it does mean that collecting contemporary art, that must be something quite different from collecting older art.

Edmund Capon

Yes, a lot of it is actually – I mean video art is almost like a Chinese scroll painting. You know, you put it up and look at it and put it away, which is actually rather useful I think.

Ien Ang

But I think that's a very interesting point, because now so much art is being produced, I just have no idea.

Edmund Capon

It is, there's no room for it.

Ien Ang

Yeah, what Judith Neilson does with her huge collection.

Edmund Capon

We won't go there.

Ien Ang

No, no, okay, no we won't. But at 4A for example?

Edmund Capon

Well, we don't collect, so our job is to keep this activity. We're a kind of barometer of contemporary attitudes and it's very sort of Pan-Asian and one of the things that interests me at the moment, and I sort of mentioned this to Michaela, is about what is Asia? Because, you know, our traditional perception was Asia was really South East Asia/East Asia. Then, oh no, India's involved, the Himalayas... So, South Asia. Now we've got West Asia and we've got North Asia.

Ien Ang

Yep, and the people who are here, my understanding is that the people that have Middle Eastern heritage – they want to be part [indistinct] as well.

Edmund Capon

Absolutely. So, suddenly, you know, the realm of Asia has got very much larger. And when I was talking about North Asia we're talking really about north of the Himalayas, north of the Tian Shan, talking about all the 'Stans, you know, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and I suppose to some extent, Mongolia. In West Asia we're talking about Islamic countries and we're talking about North Africa even where there's the Islamic culture. So really, you know, the definition of Asia now is a bit of a challenge actually.

Ien Ang

Yeah, yeah, it is, certainly for an institution such as 4A.

Edmund Capon

And you know, our image is very much two-fold, really. It's about contemporary activity and it's about China above all. So, we've got to expand that image but without diluting the focus. This is a challenge.

Ien Ang

Yeah.

Edmund Capon

And I think the way to do it, I've been sort of thinking about this. I want to have a discussion with the – a sort of strategy session talking about – because I'm very concerned about being all things to all people. You dilute your image, it's like spreading your butter over a vast piece of bread and you've got no concentration, you've got no image. If we're going to embrace this new global Asia then the product of what we actually do has got to be much more focused. So, for a small institution it's a challenge and we either say, 'Okay, our Asia is East Asia or South East Asia and that's it.' But you can't really do that anymore. And particularly as we want to very much embrace the local communities of Asian art. I mean you know, you've got quite a lot out of Western Sydney and you've got people like Hossein Valamanesh down in Adelaide who's Iranian, as you know. So, it is a challenge actually.

Ien Ang

So, that's actually an important point that I briefly want to ask about, about these artists, both these local migrant communities, their role that of course an institution such as 4A can actually make connections with them in a much more fragile way than let's say the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Edmund Capon

The Art Gallery could do more there too though. But I mean I think in terms of the institutions and more particularly with contemporary Asian art I think it's probably better to buy in what I call retrospect. There's no need to sort of be forging new reputations there. It happens a bit with Australian contemporary art. It's really rather preposterous to think that an institution like the Art Gallery of New South Wales by buying this artist or that artist from India or China or Vietnam or somewhere we're going to make a new reputation. That's silly. I think they're much better off buying in retrospect, saying well this artist is going to be important in Chinese art history.

Ien Ang

It's interesting because last week when we were at the Asian gallery at the Art Gallery there is a very big artwork by Lindy Lee for example. So, there are some Australian Chinese artists now being collected.

Edmund Capon

Oh yeah, and Lindy's a classic example. But there are not many and Lindy is very much now part of the…

Ien Ang

Establishment.

Edmund Capon

Yeah. There are not many who've made that… A lot are at the fence but they haven't been over the fence so to speak. I mean there are people like Shen Jiawei and Zhong Chen and artists like that who are pretty established here but still don't quite speak to the community about… Not quite.

Ien Ang

Yeah, so that returns us to the earlier issue of the lack of interest.

Edmund Capon

Well I think I mean lack of interest comes out of ignorance doesn't it?

Ien Ang

Yeah, indifference, yeah. Okay, I think we can leave it at that. Thank you so much.

Edmund Capon

We can always do a bit more.

END