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.

Tamara Winikoff

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The transcript was uploaded to the ACF website in January 2023.

Interviewee and position (at time of interview):

Tamara Winikoff, Executive Director, National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA)
Interviewer: Professor Tony Bennett, Western Sydney University
Interview date: 9 September 2015
Interview location: NAVA, Woolloomooloo NSW
ACF field(s): Visual arts

START

Tony Bennett

Many thanks for doing this.

Tamara Winikoff

Pleasure.

Tony Bennett

We really appreciate it. So the overview that I want to talk about is the role of NAVA, how you came to be involved in NAVA, particularly changes in its perspective, your perspective, on a number of factors bearing upon the art field – the nature of the production, consumption and distribution of art in contemporary Australia since 1994. So could we perhaps start with since the significant policy statement, Creative Nation: your sense about what have been the key changes at the national policy level that have borne upon arts practices in Australia. A little question!

Tamara Winikoff

One of the things that's interesting about what causes change in the art world is to do with politics; who's in power federally, and also the complexion at state level to a lesser degree. The way in which governments deal with the arts does have a very great bearing on public attitudes. I suppose predictably, what we see is that Liberal governments tend to favour the major organisations and more mainstream practice and they can at times be quite generous in supporting cultural infrastructure.

The Labor Party tends to support the diversity of practice; they're more grass roots. They have a greater interest in the instrumental value of the arts. And certainly the Creative Australia policy was a demonstration of that because Arts Minister Simon Crean wanted to encourage the intersection of the arts portfolio with all the other departments in government. He wanted to facilitate the instrumentality of the arts across the diversity of all aspects of life.

Compare that to Paul Keating's 1994 Creative Nation policy, which was very specific around achieving certain objectives at a time when technology was becoming influential across all fields including the arts. The way in which people viewed communication mechanisms was changing dramatically as communications technology rapidly developed and offered new opportunities.

What was particularly interesting to our organisation in the 1994 cultural policy was that it was the mechanism through which we got VisCopy established; the Visual Arts Copyright Agency. Copyright has been contentious and important across time but has become much more tricky and difficult to manage recently because of the digital environment. At that stage it was really important to get the recognition that copyright was a mechanism to affirm the value of the image to its creator as a way of establishing the relationship between the artist and their product, and also as a source of income for artists.

Those are some specific examples of things that have changed, across 20 years. We can go into more detail about various sub plots, but the big picture is that the arts, until very recently, have had a relatively good time as far as the federal government is concerned. It varies at state level depending on the complexion of particular political parties and their values.

When you get a Campbell Newman as his first act in power, abolishing the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, it's indicative of him positioning himself as one of the blokes and saying none of this arts bullshit for me, thank you very much. So it can be used in that sense to create a brand. I remember the time when an accusation against the arts

about it being an elitist practice was being used as a political weapon, which was very disadvantageous for the arts. From time to time you do get that kind of attitudinal branding, using the arts as a brand for a particular political purpose, which can be really harmful to both the practice of the arts and also the way in which the public views it.

So when you get a Paul Keating, being unapologetic about embracing a certain aspect of the arts, it's very good for the arts. Then you get somebody like George Brandis who says one thing but does something else.

Tony Bennett

In what sense?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, he says that he is a supporter of the arts but he actually has a very narrow view about what he's interested in, which is heritage practice really. It's Dickens and it's Marlowe.

Tony Bennett

You said a little earlier on that at the federal level when it's a Labor Party or a Labor government that there tends to be an instrumental orientation toward the arts and by implication, an assumption that when it's a Coalition government or a Liberal government that it's more a focus upon art for its own sake or the intrinsic value of the art. That's certainly part of what Brandis says at the moment

How does that difference play out in terms of funding priorities across different arts practices from your perspective?

Tamara Winikoff

The instrumental thing is one aspect of it and perhaps less important in a way than the embrace of diversity. So a Labor Party will be much more interested in the great variety of different forms of arts practice that satisfy different parts of the community and different demographic groups and so on. Whereas I think the Liberals are more interested in the high arts, in the highest of high arts – the opera and the ballet and the symphony orchestras and so on.

I think it's not as clear cut as that sounds, that Labor's only interested in the arts' instrumentality. But they recognise the fact that the arts is actually embedded in a whole

lot of other fields in a way that's useful and there's both social and economic value in recognising that.

Tony Bennett

Okay. Can I go back a step? Something I meant to ask you at the start but forgot to, and that's just if you could say a little bit about NAVA as an organisation and its establishment and how you came to be involved in it? If I'm right you're its founding CEO.

Tamara Winikoff

No, I wasn't the founding CEO but I was part of a group that was advocating to get a NAVA established. There were about half a dozen of us who came together to call for the establishment of a peak body for the visual arts. And, in fact, I didn't stay the distance because of other things that happened in my life but I was certainly very pleased when it happened. It got going as an idea in 1983 but I'm not sure when it was first funded by the Australia Council. I think it was 1984. Anyway it is over 30 years old. It was always meant to be the advocate for the visual arts and the voice on behalf of the visual arts, and it still is.

Tony Bennett

But particularly the visual artists, am I right?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, no, it's not just visual artists, it's the whole visual arts field. So it's both artists and other visual arts professionals, like curators or administrators or educators or anybody who's involved professionally in the visual arts. And it also takes an interest in, and from time to time does some work to strengthen the infrastructure for the visual arts, the organisational base of the visual arts.

Tony Bennett

And you came to NAVA when?

Tamara Winikoff

So I started as CEO 20 years ago almost exactly.

Tony Bennett

And can I just ask for the record, what were you doing before that?

Tamara Winikoff

The thing that I did immediately before that was I worked at the Australia Council across two art form boards – the Visual Arts Board and the Community Cultural Development Board – because I was running the Community, Environment, Art and Design program that spanned both of them. And maybe it might be relevant to say that before that, where I really sharpened my teeth on arts administration, was being the director of the Australian Centre for Photography. Running an arts organisation was a very useful foundational experience.

Tony Bennett

Yeah, I can imagine. I also wanted to ask you about over the period since 1994 what your perception of the changing role of the Australia Council has been. It's obviously gone through a number of further significant changes in organisation and direction over that period, particularly from the point of view of the visual arts, so what's your sense about, what in a big picture kind of way have been key changes in the role that it's played or sought to play?

Tamara Winikoff

Okay. Well, I think overall the Australia Council has become much more constrained by coming closer and closer under the wing of government. It's gradually losing its independence as the advocacy voice on behalf of the arts. So when I joined the Australia Council, Donald Horne was its chair and he was very strategic in being a champion for the arts and positioning the arts in the public imagination. But that's been dampened down and the Council has become much more bureaucratised and much more the obedient servant of its government masters.

What's happened in the visual arts has been quite interesting because the Council started out with both a Visual Arts Board and a Crafts Board. At the time when I joined it also had a design Arts Board, so it had that breadth of understanding of visual culture. But the Design Arts Board was closed around the late '80s. The Visual Arts Board and Craft Board were amalgamated and the crafts have gradually dropped out of being of interest to that board. For example, three years ago, Craft Australia was defunded. And the fact we are running that conference I told you about is one aspect of a program that we've picked up to try to foster the wellbeing of the crafts in the absence of that kind of direct support from the Australia Council.

Tony Bennett

So with those sorts of things falling away from the Australia Council's remit, does that have consequences for particular communities within Australia? I mean has it hit certain…

Tamara Winikoff

You mean arts communities or communities generally?

Tony Bennett

I mean the connection between arts communities and communities generally. I'm trying to get at whether – what the effects were of a hierarchy of the arts being in place in terms of who gets cut out of the official forms of government funding. I know it's at arm's length but nonetheless.

Tamara Winikoff

Well, certainly when I joined the Australia Council in the '80s, at that stage there was a Community Cultural Development Board and we all felt a huge responsibility to foster the active engagement of communities in both art making and arts appreciation; being audiences but also being makers. The Council was much more politically active at that stage because there was the Art in Working Life program and another program where the Council was working with local government. They were trying to get cultural policies adopted by local governments and their commitment to cultural funding to boost the engagement of communities in cultural activities.

The Council was also interested in multiculturalism; for example, there was a program manager whose task it was to foster the understanding across the whole Council of the necessity to recognise a variety of cultural practices based on ethnicity and the continuation of traditional cultural practices that were brought to Australia by various migrant groups. And so there was a much greater recognition of the importance of diversity and trying to understand what that meant in terms of funding and other forms of recognition. It's still the case now, in fact, probably more so, that people from different ethnic backgrounds appreciate and love different kinds of cultural practice and the Australia Council has struggled to recognise and support that diversity although it tries. When it had an active board a part of whose job it was to take responsibility for that consciousness raising, it was more effective.

So how does it affect the communities? I think that people within communities have become much more active and self-motivated about being responsible for their own

cultural well-being. And certainly having had local government engaged in cultural policy development has helped that, including having regional cultural officers who facilitate those sorts of things to happen in the regions, as well as the growth of organisations that represent different cultural groups.

Individual advocates or advocacy organisations within the disability area, within multiculturalism, youth arts and so on, have really boosted recognition of community diversity and the different interests and needs of different kinds of demographic groups. So I think that there has been a greater community effectiveness in being represented through those organisations that then help members to do what they want to do.

Tony Bennett

Okay. I was planning to talk about this later but we might as well talk about it now because we're in that territory. How would you see the position of Indigenous arts vis-à-vis ethnic community arts, if you like, in these processes? I mean have they fared better? Have they fared worse? Is the degree of recognition and take up of Indigenous arts practices different from that of community arts practices in the more general sense?

Tamara Winikoff

Yes.

Tony Bennett

And what's your sense about the key changes that have taken place there post Creative Nation?

Tamara Winikoff

Look, I think that's probably the most dramatic area of change because particularly in the visual arts, but in other art forms as well, the fostering of Indigenous visual arts has been intense. It grew as a really successful economy and some of the earnings were delivered back to local and regional and remote communities although a lot of it went into the pockets of the intermediaries; the dealers and the galleries.

But the recognition of Indigenous art practice has been one of the great wonders of the Australian visual arts world. There was a huge boom in the Indigenous visual arts economy, which had reached its peak just before, or coinciding with, the GFC [global financial crisis] but then sadly it's been falling since then. However, it was really incredible at a certain point; there was just a huge economy associated with Indigenous art and the

recognition that went with that; the valorising of particular individuals and recognition of them as celebrity practitioners. And, them then representing Australia internationally and the international brand of Australia then absorbing an Indigenous flavour.

In fact, some Indigenous spokespeople have been quite critical of their art and design being used and trivialised in a way that isn't respectful. But nevertheless, it certainly penetrated the public consciousness in the most extraordinary way. There's real love and respect now for the kind of work that is being produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. So I think it's been remarkable actually, it's been the big thing. Now there's another big thing that's replacing it, but for many years, for about 40 years, it was *the* big thing.

Tony Bennett

And what's the other big thing that's replacing it now?

Tamara Winikoff

Chinese art.

Tony Bennett

Okay. Can you say more about that? How long has that tendency been in evidence and where do you think it's at now?

Tamara Winikoff

It's probably since the GFC. That was kind of a turning point. It obviously goes with the rise of China as a world power so the art becomes internationally of interest. It's also of interest because Chinese artists were embracing contemporary practice in a way that spoke to people internationally.

So, now Chinese contemporary art is shown and collected around the world. I suppose at a grass roots level traditional Chinese painting is still loved and other Chinese artefacts but contemporary art practice is really booming.

Tony Bennett

And that's booming within Australia as an area of…

Tamara Winikoff

Around the world, not just in Australia.

Tony Bennett

Yes, around the world but within Australia does it have distinctive characteristics associated with the Chinese community in Australia, with practising artists in Australia recruited from the Chinese community, or is this more about art that's produced in China becoming popular in Australia? How do you see the relations between the two?

Tamara Winikoff

It's both, and they are interrelated. There's recognition of people who are of Chinese origin or even recent migrants here. So, for example, you get Gallery 4A being established close to Chinatown in Sydney, which is fostering the relationship between Asian artists and Australian artists and recognising them as engaged in reciprocal exchange; cultures that are merging and forging; cross-fertilising. You get an institution like Asialink that's fostering residencies for particular Australians to go to various parts of Asia. So it's not just China, it's the whole of Asia really. It reflects the political aligning of Australia as part of the Asia Pacific region so it's no accident that that's happening.

Tony Bennett

No, indeed. But can I just go back to the question of Indigenous art and the market having gone into, not a terminal decline, but having gone into a decline since 2008? I'm wondering what you attribute that to. And I'm asking it partly because a number of people writing in *The Australian* recently, including Nicholas Rothwell, have been saying that it's partly due to the lack of a kind of an art oriented criticism of Indigenous art, so that the market doesn't know how to discriminate between what's good and what's bad, what's merely faddish and so on and so forth. What's your sense about what the reasons for the tailing off of that market are?

Tamara Winikoff

Look, art investors are fickle and they like something new. I think probably there are contributing factors, like what Rothwell's saying, that having an art criticism that is based on a really deep understanding of the nature of Indigenous culture and practice, the more of that the better. However, there are a number of people who've made that the focus of their intellectual work. There's a plethora of academics who are very interested in Indigenous art practice and culture and write a lot and critically about it. When you look at the books in the art gallery bookshop, for example, probably about a quarter of them are about Indigenous art practice. It's huge.

So there's no lack of scholarship. But, of course, it's such a complicated question because our understanding of the nature of Indigenous culture is still very constrained because the difference between the two cultures is huge. If you're not born and brought up into it and integrated as an Indigenous person, you probably will never get it, not really.

Tony Bennett

Yes, I'm sure that's true.

Tamara Winikoff

But just to go back to why there's less interest in Indigenous art than there was, I think it's also to do with the fact that it's been so commodified and so abused because it was seen to be a money making machine. There have been terrible injustices perpetrated where artists were taken off community and more or less put into a production line factory environment to churn out work that looked like certain modes of Indigenous practice but it devalued the quality and the authenticity of the work and consequently became less interesting to collectors.

Tony Bennett

Okay, so maybe we'll talk about the changing nature of art markets a little bit. You said a little bit earlier on that you thought that one of the changes that had taken place since 1994 was that the sphere of visual arts production had become a bit less autonomous in relationship to government than used to be the case, that it was more bureaucratised, more subject to various forms about…

Tamara Winikoff

Yes, by the Council.

Tony Bennett

Is that all arts practice or just the Australia Council you're talking about there?

Tamara Winikoff

No, I think it's the Australia Council, not so much art practice generally. I think art practice fluctuates but it is its own creature really. There are many, many artists who have nothing to do with government. In the visual arts, there's a whole set of infrastructures growing up, some of which are not funded at all. If we look over that period from 1994 to the present,

the contemporary arts organisations have become completely stable and legitimised as a network around the country. The same goes for the craft bases.

You've got the major galleries moving into contemporary practice, so QAGOMA [Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art] in Queensland with the Asia Pacific Triennial as its lynchpin, the work that's emerged out of the Sydney Biennale, the Biennial in Adelaide, which has really influenced what that gallery's been doing. Each of the galleries has now fully embraced contemporary practice. There are all sorts of reasons for it, but the contemporary art spaces have certainly been very influential in providing a platform for contemporary work that then gets picked up further up the food chain.

And then the really interesting one is the artist run initiatives where mostly they rely on volunteer labour with artists doing it all themselves; they're not getting support from the federal or state governments. So in one sense, it gives them independence, where they can do whatever they like and they're of interest to collectors because of that, because they're not being controlled or influenced by funding criteria.

So I think that the way in which the art world has grown is across the full spectrum really. On the one side it's very much dependent on arts funding and at the other end it's completely feral.

Tony Bennett

Okay. And in between you talked about arts collectors there and I'm just wondering who you have in mind. Are these individual arts collectors? Are they the commercial galleries? And what's behind my question is your sense about what's the balance of forces, if you like, in the contemporary art market between things like art investment funds, the role of the corporate sector in terms of sponsorship, individual collectors, large commercial galleries, small commercial galleries?

Tamara Winikoff

It's hard to answer these questions in a few pithy sentences really because it's so complicated and over that time it's changed so much.

Tony Bennett

What's your sense about the big directions of change?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, I think that what's happening is that there's a multiplicity of different mechanisms for distributing art and for accessing art by collectors. So whereas the commercial galleries had an ascendency at a certain moment, they grew up from about the '60s.

Around the '80s and '90s and even up to the 2000s they were one of the major mechanisms through which collectors would find and choose work.

But now with the digital environment, that's been completely challenged. A lot of the commercial galleries have closed. Now you're getting a multiplicity of different models. So, for example, some of the artist run spaces have become places that sell work; they're entering into that commercial world. And collectors are interested because they're seen as the new and the upcoming. Biennales have really proliferated. There are now hundreds of Biennales around the world and they make artist's careers. The artists who are chosen for Biennales are sometimes chosen serially. Once you get chosen for one, you're likely to appear in many others.

The globalisation of the art market is occurring through that mechanism because most of those Biennales do choose work from around the world, they're not just for local, in-country work. Collectors will go on buying tours; they'll go and visit a sequence of Biennales that are deliberately holding their events close to one another in order to create an investor trail.

And then there's also the role of the major institutions in valorising certain artists, in taking an interest in contemporary practice and thereby profiling the work of particular artists which thus become of interest to collectors and so on. And, in fact, there have been some very unholy and illegal practices that have developed where there are too close relationships between people working within the state institutions and those running private commercial galleries. One of them was exposed recently [in 2012] through the court case to settle a dispute between a Victorian National Gallery curator, Geoffrey Smith and his life partner, art dealer Robert Gould. Then, of course, the auction houses are a phenomenon in their own right where they will source work and sell it wherever it's going to get the best price. So there's the movement of work around the world through those networks of intermediaries.

Tony Bennett

Would you describe this as a case of globalisation or is it more that the Australian art field is locked up in a particular region of international art markets? I mean what's your sense

about what the flow of Australian-produced art is internationally and of art into Australia internationally? Is it global without boundaries or are there particular kinds of like networks of international flows that are more significant than others?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, there again, it's a complicated story. There have been the major cities that have been the commercial art hubs, like New York and Paris and London and so on. The Asian network now is becoming a player, so they're starting to emerge as being engaged in the whole economic network of art movement. The thing is, of course, that where art is treated as an investment, it's used in a different way from art that's collected for love. So there are different kinds of collectors although some of them overlap, those who both love it and buy and sell for profit.

Those people will use different mechanisms depending on what is their purpose in buying. There are not only those stable entities but there are also brokers and dealers who are freelance who will act on behalf of particular collectors, for example, and will go anywhere they need to go, depending on the wealth of the collector. You get somebody like John Stringer who was collecting for Kerry Stokes, who would go anywhere in the world to buy for him.

So globalisation is meaning more and more that Australian artists will go overseas to get their work exhibited, seen and collected at an international and local level. You get exchange occurring between artists from different countries that will get them familiar with one another's countries of practice and that builds a relationship, which then collectors pick up on. It's such a complicated web of interconnectedness.

Tony Bennett

Yeah I understand that. But these different markets according to some of the literature I've been reading, one of the key changes is the operation of investment funds in which you invest in art like you would in any other commodity, and of large international auction houses, they have certain consequences for the price of some kinds of art against others. And that this increasing marketisation of art leads to new kinds of divisions between artists, that it tends to celebrate certain kinds of artistic celebrity against others, that some artists get scooped off as it were from the majority of artists who remain poorly paid and so on. What's your sense on these issues?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, I think that it's part of the larger story of the power of celebrity. But, yes, celebrity, it's a factor that attracts investment or, they're mutually supportive as it were. Saatchi's interest in the Young British Artists is a key example of it where he'll handpick a group, and he'll foster them. He's an advertising agent, so he knows how to do it effectively and he builds multimillion dollar careers for those artists but for himself as well. In their gaining in value he's getting the profit from the value of their work.

It's true, that there's a kind of a class system where you get the most successful artists being hugely successful – multimillion dollar profits are made out of them – and they make some of that profit themselves. So Damien Hirst for example, can afford to make the diamond skull. It's part of his shtick.

Tony Bennett

But have those dynamics been at play in Australia?

Tamara Winikoff

To a lesser extent but a little. We're a backwater in a sense because the market is small and the geographic boundary is still significant. It costs so much to get artists and their works into Europe and the US, and it's still too early in the Asian market for that to become an evident benefit, but it may over time.

Tony Bennett

Are there any particular Australian artists or schools of artists whom you think have benefitted in this way or who have been disadvantaged?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, I don't know that I could call them schools of artists. I don't think…

Tony Bennett

Are there particular ones?

Tamara Winikoff

…it's like that. I think there are individuals who do particularly well but they're not members of schools. I mean they don't have a uniform style.

Tony Bennett

Right, okay.

Tamara Winikoff

I wouldn't describe it that way. It's not like Golden Summers. I mean we're not talking about people who are dead at the moment, we're talking about live artists, yes?

Tony Bennett

Yes, but I'd be interested in your assessment of any changes in the current logic of art markets for what have been the relative reputations and stakes in the art field of deceased artists.

Tamara Winikoff

Well, anybody who's dead who's had some celebrity – and there's a smallish group of those – will command quite high prices, so you get the Boyds and the Nolans the Drysdales and that whole generation of artists, many of whom lived and worked internationally, particularly in the UK, who became well known in both parts of the world and whose work is very valuable now.

Tony Bennett

And they were also for the main part men.

Tamara Winikoff

Oh yes indeed.

Tony Bennett

So I'm just wondering whether – just to talk about the position of women artists for a while – I mean whether over the last 30 years or so you think that has changed significantly? I know that there are artists and groups that represent feminist art practice, women's art practices and so on, but in terms of the overall organisation of the field, has the position of women artists changed significantly would you say?

Tamara Winikoff

Look, I think it's a bit better than it was but it's still not good. And, in fact, there's a bit of work being done on it at the moment by somebody (Elvis Richardson) that we're providing advice to, who is trying to gather the statistics on it. And the statistics are not good. What

you get is a greater percentage of women studying art. But once they graduate and move into the structures of the art world, gradually the balance swings the other way and most of the collected artists are male artists and most of the heads of schools and heads of cultural organisations and so on. The glass ceiling still operates in the arts as it does elsewhere.

But certainly since the '70s there's been a much greater recognition of women artists and that moment of advocacy around the '70s and '80s did make a difference. It made the art world self-conscious about being so sexist. And we're just seeing that happening again where there's a new generation of women who are saying, 'hey, you know, this isn't a level playing field'.

Tony Bennett

Can we go back and talk a little bit about something you touched on – the role of [the] institutions GOMA [Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane] and MONA [Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart] too presumably, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney [MCA], that was a bit earlier than 1994 but not too much, the 1980s I think.

Tamara Winikoff

Yes

Tony Bennett

And you've suggested that they've made contemporary art much more accessible to the broader public. They've also had consequences for the activities of the more traditional galleries, like the state galleries. So I'm just wondering what you see as the respective roles of the different art institutions, the state galleries versus the museums of contemporary art, and the regional galleries. But I also wanted to ask, again it predates the 1994 Creative Nation statement a little bit, but over that period the National Gallery of Australia has become a – what's your sense about what difference that's made to arts practice within Australia – the changing constellation of relations between the art museums, the art museum sector?

Tamara Winikoff

They've all had different histories, of course, because they've happened at different times. For example, the Australian National Gallery opened in the early '80s. Having a National Gallery was a gesture to say we have a peak organisation. But actually it isn't really the

peak organisation. It's as much a state gallery as any of the other state galleries despite the name. But, you know, the hierarchy has changed over time because they've proliferated, so where you might have started only having state galleries, now you've got those other contemporary art spaces like the MCA, ACCA [Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne] and MONA and so on.

Although they're different from one another again because MONA's largely a private institution, and White Rabbit is another one where you get a particular individual who's motivated. MONA has made a huge difference because of the drive and imagination of the person who established it – David Walsh – who's used architecture, performance, tourism, food and wine, technology. He's such a smart operator that he really has shamed everybody else into thinking again about the role of the institution. MONA has singlehandedly transformed the economy of Hobart, if not the state. People go to Tasmania to go to MONA, so that's a hugely influential institution.

What we're seeing is these layers and layers of institutions from the state galleries right through to the artist run spaces and each of them makes a difference; they are symbiotic and cross-influence one another. State galleries have ceased to be just heritage institutions and the stage for the blockbuster – huge exhibitions from overseas, which were very influential. Now they are recognising the importance of contemporary practice within Australia itself and having major exhibitions, like Melbourne Now, for example, which was, a mega enterprise.

Then, of course there's the Asia Pacific Triennial, which has forged relationships through art between Australia and Asia and the Pacific, which have been extremely powerful. There's recognition, though that event is over 20 years old, that it's raising our consciousness of Asian contemporary culture and theirs of ours.

The state galleries are not only collecting institutions but also serve as the base for bringing work to Australia and bringing Australian work to the public, so they play multiple roles. We also see them being much more concerned about being places of entertainment, for example, Edmund Capon at the Art Gallery of New South Wales opened it up every Wednesday night as a place for fun. There were movies and lectures and drinks events and talks and dance and performance. It became a space for community engagement through a variety of cultural activities rather than only a holding and display place for cultural heritage.

Tony Bennett

Do you think that over the period, again it's a hopelessly large question but it's your sense of the overall drift I'm interested in, has the nature of the members of the Australian public who have become involved in art changed significantly? Are different publics reached by these art practices? I mean one line of argument would say, well, these tend to attract people from the same demographic background.

Tamara Winikoff

No, I wouldn't say that at all.

Tony Bennett

So how do you think the composition of, not the buying public but the kind of visiting and enjoying et cetera public, has changed in Australia?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, I think that the younger demographic are more attracted to the arts. It used to be the purview of the grey-haired brigade that was prevalent. Because of the nature of the institutions changing to become much more funky and much more engaged with a variety of cultural forms of consumption, they attract different kinds of people, certainly different ages. And certain institutions very deliberately cater to a wider or a more diverse audience.

So, for example, you get the Powerhouse at Casula in Western Sydney that's absolutely dedicated to its local community, so it does things for Arabic women or for Somalian youth or for people with disability. The regional galleries do this a lot. They'll deliberately create an exhibition around a particular demographic group.

They'll do several exhibitions at a time, so that they try to bring different audiences into contact with each other as a kind of a community welding mechanism. I remember a very clever curator (many years ago now when this was still early for this to be happening), he would deliberately hold openings for three completely different demographic groups on the same night. So he'd show the work from the local school, from the Indigenous community and from some kind of whizz bang travelling exhibition. Different audiences would be mixing together, so it was a very smart move.

Certainly the institutions have come under pressure and voluntarily want to diversify their audiences, partly to justify their existence to demonstrate their value to a much broader group of citizens but also that they have some interest in culturally diverse practices.

Tony Bennett

Okay, great. Just a couple of other questions. One is just to ask you about art schools and how you think art school training in Australia has changed, is changing and what you see its consequences are on a broad canvas?

Tamara Winikoff

Change comes in waves. There was the moment when art schools were amalgamated into the universities, which I think was very disadvantageous to art schools.

Tony Bennett

Why?

Tamara Winikoff

Because they were forced into a form of academicism that didn't sit comfortably with the nature of their practice. They were forcing themselves into a mould that was imposed because the universities didn't recognise the intellectual endeavour of say a painting as opposed to piece of written text. The way in which everything had to be theorised in text rather than through the work itself I think is still a problem.

There's also the problem of the contraction of funding for art schools and a lot of them are either closing or getting rid of some of the courses that they teach because they don't get the uptake that justifies them or they're too expensive to run. So, for example, there are very few ceramics courses now because they're expensive to run. There's a greater move towards design and communications and IT because they're newer contemporary practice and much cheaper to offer. There's a demand for it because it's more vocationally successful for people who do it. We're seeing the loss of a lot of diversity in offering over the last few years, probably about the last 10 years. We're also seeing an interesting development in some merging between the TAFEs and the higher ed art schools or institutions, so that that distinction between vocational education and academic education is disappearing.

Student numbers are dropping because the cost of trying to study and carry forward a HECS debt needs to be offset against what your likely income level is going to be as a graduate. So I think there's a lot militating against art education at the moment. The cutting of funding support to the TAFEs pretty much wiped out a whole lot of cultural offerings. People just couldn't afford to pay for those degrees or diplomas and certificate qualifications that were being offered.

The TAFEs also fulfilled a different kind of function. As well as training people to be vocational artists, they also were training people through the arts into being confident learners. So a lot of Indigenous people or women coming back into the workforce would start with the arts or retired people who wanted to do it for pleasure. Now, most of those people can't afford to do it anymore, so the TAFEs' social function has been contracted. Although in some states now they're reversing that. The world is volatile, nothing stays the same!

Tony Bennett

The other question I wanted to ask was one you touched on: questions of digitisation in the art field. These come up in a number of different ways, the consequences for changing arts practice, the consequences for how people access the arts, how they access information about the arts. Whichever perspective you want to take, what's your overall assessment about key areas of difference? It was in 1994 when Creative Nation was produced. It was the same time that the service providers became generally available. So that really was the beginning of where we are now.

Tamara Winikoff

Yes it's just changing every aspect of the arts from the nature of the art practice itself to the way it's accessed – all those things that you just said. I think what's interesting about it is that tussle between materiality and the virtual. As a maker, when you use your hand to make something rather than the machine as the intermediary, the result is a very different experience. For audiences, we see it being played out as the new generations become more and more attuned to the machine, the kind of art experience you have mediated through a screen is very different from that with a tangible object.

Tony Bennett

Has its influence been mainly in the production of new kinds of art as opposed to making pre-digital art more widely accessible? There's the influence of digitisation in terms of making new forms of artistic production possible, internet artwork and so on. And then some galleries will digitise their collection with a view to making it more generally available. I'm unclear about how far the latter strategy has worked in opening up new access to older art forms or whether we should be assessing the impact of the digital revolution more in terms of the new kinds of art practices that it's making possible and the constituencies it's involving in those. It's not an either/or, of course.

Tamara Winikoff

Well, no, it's both. The way people engage with art is being very much affected by the digital environment. So, for example, you see kids going through a gallery and not actually looking at the work but photographing every work that they take home with them. I'd be very interested to know if they ever revisit them but they're taking an image as a souvenir. Rather than looking at the work, they're looking at the picture of the work as a sort of trophy.

Also the nature of the work is changing, so that you get time-based work, which is very different from a fixed object as an experience.

And then the marketing of work through online galleries, with people buying through the online environment rather than having a physical relationship with the work before they buy. Or they are buying digital works to display, installed in the home.

Yeah, it's hard to encapsulate all of that. I think that it is just a very different experience that people are embracing because it's the nature of our world now, that so much of our experience is virtual and art is part of that. Art is always of the present, so whatever the present is, that will be the art.

Tony Bennett

Okay. I'm asking one final question and that's to say is there anything I haven't asked you that I ought to ask you while there's a chance?

Tamara Winikoff

Well, you didn't ask me about heritage. Were you going to talk about that or have we covered it?

Tony Bennett

In terms of the heritage field we're asking people questions more about the non-art museum sector and heritage sites that are not connected with the visual arts, particularly museums of natural history, history museums, the National Museum of Australia and so on. Non-art heritage, if you like, is it's more common term, but I notice you've been using the term 'heritage institutions' for the state art galleries.

Tamara Winikoff

Well, I think that's what they were, though I think they've evolved. As custodians of our cultural history I think that fits under the heritage banner. But one of the interesting things

is that if you look at what's popular, say impressionism and post-impressionism, they will always get huge audiences compared with contemporary practice. So there's still an emotional attachment to the not-too distant past. But you don't get the same kind of love of things that are more than a couple of hundred years old. I think then the engagement is very different.

It's interesting to study what people really want to see and what they value. Some of the things that emerge out of surveys that have been done, for example, by the Australia Council or other research projects where people are asked what it is that they value, a lot of people will say, "look, I don't go and look at art but I support the fact that we should have a national collection," because they see it as the keeping place for what we have been at any particular moment historically. People identify with the past as part of self.

Tony Bennett

A question that's prompted through what you say about heritage art is – do you think that the category, it's not a strict opposite, but do you think the category of an avant-garde is pertinent, helpful, useful in the contemporary Australian context?

Tamara Winikoff

Yes, although what they call it now is 'radicality'. There is an interest in the concept of radical practice, the idea that everything that's old is being supplanted by the new. And certainly, our whole orientation when we're looking at art is that it's something that is innovative. There's a great obsession with the new rather than valuing something because it's a supreme example of a tradition in the way say that the Asian cultures will appreciate things.

There's a different impetus in terms of what we want of art. It's pretty interesting to interrogate what we regard as new. Is a new way of doing something but it's still an old thing, new? Or does the idea have to be a different idea from anything we've ever seen before or the means of its production? There's certainly an obsession with the new and an interest amongst some practitioners with the idea of radicality having a political aspect. But, as you know, Australia's a relatively comfortable country. When I went to the meeting of the International Association of Art last year in Korea, a guy there from Turkey was talking about what's at risk for artists who are engaging in a certain political form of practice – it's a matter of life and death. And you think, well, in Australia our concept of radicality is a pretty cosy one.

Tony Bennett

I think radicality is a good closing word.

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