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Collections – Locating tradition and enshrining protection

Collections are the touchstone for collective memory wherever they are housed, but for museums and art museums they are pivotal to daily work practice, they are the lovingly dusted and polished heirlooms of our coffee tables at home thrust into the wider realms of museology and public institutions. They are the signifiers of our connectedness to each other, our past histories and stories of challenge and response. Most importantly though, they are the tangible legacies of time and place and ideology we pass on to future generations. There is so little left of altruism, philanthropy and connoisseurship in contemporary reality. I have often argued that curatorship is very like journalism, one of the final bastions of independent voice and idealistic values of truth and interpretation.

My personal crusade over the past decade has been in articulating the obscure corners of our cultural histories, the neglected figures of past and present, especially those of northland such as Herbert and Beatrix Dobbie, Kate Mair, Minnie White, Adele Younghusband TL Drummond and many others over my curatorial career. Interestingly, more often than not, these figures have been women - disacknowledged by parochialism and patriarchy. But I have a new, driven, and politically fraught crusade! and its catalyst is the emergence of nationhood as expressed through our fine contemporary art, sought after all over the world now, yet subject to the whims of '*zeitgeist politics*' at local government levels all over this country.

I'm talking about the 'true' national art collection, which is NOT the amalgam Te Papa/National Art Gallery collection in Wellington, and the controversially side-lined Toi Te Papa Art Of the Nation exhibition, which surely well deserved its place in the Festival of the Arts! - but the truly stunning art which stretches from the collections in Invercargill to Whangarei and everywhere in between. The most important of these are arguably the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Timaru and Christchurch Art Gallery collections, and lets not forget Gore! And the collections of New Plymouth Govett Brewster, Auckland Art Gallery and the embattled Sarjeant Gallery in Wanganui.

So long as art and heritage objects are regarded as a quantifiable asset register of councils they will be subject to the whims of three -yearly political grandstanding. It is one of the ironies of our age that the devolution of responsibility from central to local government has come at a time when the same government, has for the first time in our history grasped the connection to creative culture and national identity. Arts and cultural sectors are flourishing nationally, especially in the regions of New Zealand. Cultural tourism is buzzing !!

Councils now have a specific statutory obligation to the 'cultural wellbeing' of their communities, and yet there are at least five regional and metropolitan museums and galleries rudderless at present, with directors walking away from their positions or being constructively dismissed. Most often for being emphatic about the sanctity of collections and curatorship from blatant political interference.

We don't make cultural value judgments about ANZAC Day, for instance, based on the number of people shivering around the cenotaph at dawn, but by those of us non-participatory souls who still acknowledge its significance, even if we don't visit. Nor do we question the significantly greater spend on parks and rose gardens and expect turnstiles and cash registers generating income to justify their existence. They are simply part of the landscape of leisure and aesthetic wellbeing we expect in a mature community environment.

In August last year, as guest judge of the Wanganui Art Review Awards, at the Sarjeant Gallery, I had the opportunity to speak in the hallowed dome of that venerable institution, when controversy raged over Mayor Michael Laws plans to trim budgets, collections and staff at one of the counties oldest and most iconic art museums and axe plans for the expansion of the gallery and the several million dollars the gallery trust board had raised to date. The government withdrew its funding of \$3 million towards this project, which ironically again, was offered to the Whangarei Art Museum if it could get its council support for the proposed move to the old library building. Whangarei was not able to take up this offer in the timeframe and those funds have now gone to major redevelopment of the Dowse in Lower Hutt

In this speech, I outlined my ideas for the outwardly and it seems, beautifully simple mechanism of parliamentary protection. A protection in perpetuity of the distributed national art collection, and implicit acknowledgement that the national art collection is truly national, in this sense. The identification of national treasures as belonging to all New Zealanders inter-generationally and throughout the nation, as identified by our accessions registers and collections policy documents, with regard to future growth.

In other words the complete '*ringfencing*' of regional collections by parliament and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, to guard against any future dispersal of national art treasures for the purposes of bolstering operational income or capital development.

After all, as I said, we register cars, and dogs. *Why not our art treasures??*

The accessions lists already exist within our institutions to collate a national data-base. Such a move would remove a regional political issue to a national forum and the ugly personality politics inherent in such a debate. The local papers praised an 'inspiring' speech. I have since discussed and lobbied many in the arts sector, including the associate minister Judith Tizard at an invited lunch with mayor Pamela Peters and other arts personalities here in Whangarei last year. I have persuaded our local list MP and museum board member Hon. Brian Donnelly to take up the cause in parliament and he is progressing discussions with Jill Pettis MP and the ministry as either a private members bill or a government initiative. TVone 'Frontseat' arts programme have been in Whangarei to extensively film and interview myself and others, on the collections debate, in an upcoming programme. I have also spent much time discussing this idea with peers such as Chris Saines of Auckland Art gallery, Anthony Wright of Museums Aotearoa, Jenny Harper former National Art Gallery director, Tracy Puklowski of Te Papa Paerangi National Services, Sir Hugh Cassons of English Heritage and many more. All have been supportive of the concept, even though there seems no world precedent for such a move. We have led the world in legislation in so many innovative ways – why not art !!

In Korea national treasures are numbered and identified by the government, and those institutions which house them, can boast of their custodianship of these registered national artefacts in their collections. It is used as an effective branding identity. In 2005 the Office of the Auditor-General conducted a comprehensive audit of art collections in the country. Whangarei Art Museum was one of the handful of institutions selected to participate. The results of this overall report are due to be presented to parliament later this year. Surely this is a good opportunity for members of parliament to question the general 'health' of the distributed collections, and ask "where to from here" and future-proof our collections, in perpetuity, and for all.

-Scott Pothan