Introduction

Compelling cultures: Representing cultural diversity and cohesion in multicultural Australia

Anna Edmundson, Kylie Message and Ursula Frederick

Figure 2.1 Rejecting sanitised culture

Photograph courtesy of Ursula Frederick and Katie Hayne

In a 2001 address to the NSW History Council, cultural historian Ien Ang called for a new national narrative for twenty-first century Australia, one that encompassed and enabled 'citizens from of all walks of life—not just the so-called "mainstream"'—to have a greater sense of ownership of and belonging within the nation. She posed a series of important questions to the forum:

> How can we recognise diversity as integral and intrinsic to the nation's history, and not just as a decorative afterthought? How can we develop a more diverse, shared, as well as open and living sense of heritage, something that all groups and communities contribute to, including those whose stories and voices are generally marginalised from the canonical national history?[1]

Although the questions raised by Ang are as vital today as they were at the start of the century, they have, for the most part, gone unanswered. Indeed, the first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked increasingly by debate and anxiety over the ways that migration, multiculturalism and citizenship have been characterised in Australia and globally. This issue of *Humanities Research* recognises these concerns as being more pressing than ever, and engages with recent debates in Australian public culture on how best to represent and mediate cultural diversity in a multicultural society. As editors of the volume, we sought contributions from authors who would provide insight into the ways in which concepts of social unity and cultural diversity are constructed, manipulated and disseminated in Australian public culture, and we challenged them to critically engage with the interplays between government policy and the arts and heritage sectors. We invited art historians Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi to provide a preface to frame the volume's concerns within a wider international context. And, in recognition that her comments provided the initial impetus for the development of this issue, we asked Ang for an opening commentary—a 'provocation'—on the state of affairs at the tail end of this first decade of the twenty-first century.

All of the articles in this volume demonstrate the complexity and unique historicity of Australian cultural diversity. Also of particular significance is the apparent worldwide retreat from 'multiculturalism' as the government policy of choice for managing cultural diversity in complex Western democracies. As such, articles in the first half of *Compelling Cultures* take current government policy and practice as a framework to examine significant changes that cultural diversity doctrines have undergone in the early twenty-first century, and consider some of the ways in which public heritage institutions such as museums have responded to changing government ideas and initiatives. These articles provide a scholarly appraisal of the current value and limitations of 'multiculturalism' within the domain of public culture and national heritage.

Any examination of multicultural Australia must also consider the unique political and cultural concerns of the Indigenous population, and articles in the second half of the volume examine diversity and cultural cohesion through the lens of Indigenous art. All of the articles substantiate Howard Morphy's premise that art is a way of acting in the world and serves as a significant arena for contact and mediation within Indigenous communities and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agents. While ontological differences between Western and non-Western art traditions might at first appear irreconcilable, the articles in this volume demonstrate that even seemingly incompatible or contradictory differences can be mediated. Ultimately, all the articles argue that museums, the arts and other forms of public culture can enrich understandings of diversity and social cohesion as well as provide a riposte to the current lack of direction that is apparent in Australian multicultural policy.

We go to press with news of the passing of Jerzy (George) Zubrzycki, who was widely regarded as 'the pioneer of multiculturalism in Australia'. James Jupp, Director of the Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at The Australian National University, recalls that despite preferring the term 'cultural pluralism' to 'multiculturalism', Zubrzycki

> gave definition and direction to the policies of the Fraser and Hawke governments and was critical of the revisionism of the Howard regime. Nevertheless he was appointed to Howard's 1999 agenda committee, which retained the term 'multiculturalism' and reaffirmed existing policy towards diversity and integration.[2]

Zubrzycki's research demonstrated the importance of culture and diversity to strong citizenship, and we acknowledge the significance of his contribution.

About the articles

The volume opens with a preface by Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi entitled 'Culture/cohesion/compulsion: museological artifice and its dilemmas'. The authors examine the representation of cultural diversity within public culture and museums in terms of a continuing dialectic between two contending models. The first model is dependent on neo-liberal notions of diversity, hybridity and migratory and transitory identity, while the second, which they call a 'nativist' model, emphasises social cohesion and the permanence and persistence of individual and group identity. The ubiquity of this binary is reiterated in different guises in several articles within this volume. Farago and Preziosi's preface offers a theoretical overview for *Compelling Cultures*, which is consistent with but also expands on some of the issues raised by other contributors to the volume. It speaks to international and regional debates that have had a significant impact on debates about museums and public culture in Australia and thus contributes new ways of thinking about the current dilemmas experienced by scholars and professionals working in a field that is, as Farago and Preziosi note, itself undergoing metamorphosis.

Following Farago and Preziosi, Ang's provocation, 'Beyond multiculturalism: a journey to nowhere?', contends that the current lack of confidence in multiculturalism has implications for the range of experiences that are available to Australians in the public sphere. Incorporating her response to the most recently opened exhibition at the National Museum of Australia (NMA), Ang comments that exhibitions such as *Australian Journeys* attest to the centrality of ideas of cultural flow and cosmopolitanism that are gaining ground within mainstream Australian culture. Although she supports the general focus on transnationalism, Ang critiques *Australian Journeys* for failing to differentiate between the seeming permeability of border flows implied in transnational journeys and the very real border restrictions that accompany government

immigration policies. Although its curators do not regard *Australian Journeys* as a migration exhibition per se, migration appears as a central theme in its wider examination of the movement (journeys) of goods and people in and out of Australia since 1778.

The NMA figures as an important case study for articles in the first half of this volume, and each of the authors invokes various elements of the debates attracted by the NMA in relation to its representation of diversity leading up to and after the 2003 review.[3] As Ang, Witcomb, Hutchison and Message all note, the NMA has developed and supported migration-focused exhibitions (such as *Horizons* and *Migration Memories*) that have contributed to the narrative of migration history in Australia. We recognise that while corporate and planning documents demonstrate the aims and even intended purpose of museums and exhibitions, they cannot speak for the internal processes, conflicts and negotiations occurring throughout the development process—all of which impact on the final form and experience offered by any exhibition. Unfortunately, however, NMA staff members were unable to contribute a case study of the development of the *Australian Journeys* Gallery to this volume. In lieu of this, we would direct readers to the *Collections and Gallery Development Plan 2004–2008* and the *Australian Journeys* and *Creating A Country* exhibition briefs, available on the museum's website.[4]

Ang's commentary is followed by a series of refereed articles, the first of which presents an overview of the social, political and cultural landscape in which multicultural policy and the NMA were conceptualised. The article by Kylie Message, 'Culture, citizenship and Australian multiculturalism: the contest over identity formation at the National Museum of Australia', begins by arguing that the respective institutions of citizenship and museums came into especially direct dialogue in 2001 when the NMA opened as a feature of the Centenary of Federation celebrations. Message situates the NMA within wider debates about the relationship between museums and citizenship that have centred on the re-evaluation of ideas of power and authority and the dissemination of these ideas into the public sphere. She frames the development of the NMA within wider changing ideas about citizenship and multiculturalism in Australia and argues that, in its final guise, the NMA aspired to be self-consciously postmodern, post-colonial and pluralist in its approach to representing Australian experience.

As Message and other contributors to *Compelling Cultures* comment, museums in the twenty-first century have increasingly positioned themselves as agents of social inclusion and cohesion, as well as venues for alternative histories, public debate and minority representation. At the same time, however, Australia's museums and galleries are highly dependent on government funding for their survival. In some cases, this may lead to a conflict of interest between an institution's fealty to government and its commitment to represent the concerns

of minority communities and foster honest public debate. The complexity of how museums operate is captured by former NMA Director Dawn Casey who, in 2006, stated: 'One cannot talk about [museum] content in isolation when there are also visitors, governments…and governing bodies to consider.'[5] The museum, then, is a space produced at the intersection of political policy, government funding, public opinion and institutional and curatorial intent.

In 'Migration, social cohesion and cultural diversity: can museums move beyond pluralism?', Andrea Witcomb further examines the complexity of the relationship between government hegemony (political discourse) and museum exhibition narratives (public discourse). Her analysis of the 2003 review of the NMA focuses on its critique of the Australian migration history exhibition, *Horizons*. She situates *Horizons* within a survey that presents a longer genealogy of Australian migration museums and exhibitions in order to highlight and contextualise an emerging association between migration and cultural diversity, whereby, since the introduction of multiculturalism in the 1970s, migration has come to be privileged as the primary means of representing cultural diversity in Australia. Witcomb argues that the recent conservative climate in Australia has led to an intense questioning of what constitutes Australian identity, a questioning in which models of community defined by notions of cultural diversity have had little political traction. She concludes her discussion by exploring alternative access models that might be developed and calls, in the final instance, for new models for exhibiting diversity, which challenge the discourse of pluralism to move beyond rhetoric.

Mary Hutchison's article, 'Dimensions for a folding exhibition: exhibiting diversity in theory and practice in the *Migration Memories* exhibitions', provides a valuable companion piece to Witcomb's article. Hutchison provides an exegesis for the *Migration Memories* research project, which explored alternative approaches to 'exhibiting migration'. The article explores representations of cultural diversity within the genre of Australian migration exhibitions and discusses the specific approach taken in the *Migration Memories* project, which consciously attempted to circumvent prior models of migration exhibitions that have tended to be characterised by either the 'celebration of diversity model' advocated by multicultural policy or the 'consensus model' of social cohesion policy, which, according to Hutchison, requires an individualisation of difference. Using the *Migration Memories* project as an example, Hutchison suggests reframing diversity as an interaction between different social-historical positions and experiences. This reconfiguration of the representation of diversity might be achieved through interventions in the practice of exhibition making that consist, on the one hand, of privileging the personal, historical and local as distinct but connected points of view, and aiming, on the other hand, to create an approach to exhibition development and interpretative devices that is based on agency, collaboration and imagination.

In her article, 'But where are you really from? The "crisis" of identity examined through the work of four Asian-Australian artists', Anna Edmundson provides a brief history of cultural diversity doctrines in Australia from monoculturalism to multiculturalism. Using the work of artists Liu Xiao Xian, Hou Leong, Owen Leong and Kate Benyon as key reference points, she examines some of the failings of current models of multiculturalism to secure a place for non-Anglo and non-Indigenous Australians within the national imaginary. She argues that the material reality of an increasingly culturally diverse population will need to be mediated by government in ways more sophisticated than a retreat from multiculturalism in favour of assimilation discourses or the nostalgic longing for a more culturally homogenous past.

Edmundson's argument reiterates those raised by Ang: that issues of representing cultural diversity within a wider national meta-narrative are increasingly complex as Australian society itself is becoming more complex. The Australian population is more culturally heterogeneous and more global in outlook than ever before, and these changes have brought more complexity to civic issues such as national identity, history and heritage. Adequately representing multicultural diversity while simultaneously producing a coherent meta-narrative to represent the Australian community writ large continues to be one of the great difficulties of nation-focused museum and gallery productions. At the same time, new museums globally have been marked by an increasing commitment to strengthening dialogues and improving relationships with Indigenous communities. This could mean representing Indigenous perspectives of Australian history that are oppositional to older, 'heroic' narratives of Australian settler society or incorporate different 'ways of seeing' history.

In his article, 'Acting in a community: art and social cohesion in Indigenous Australia', Howard Morphy demonstrates the role played by art in the construction of community as a shared sense of identity and common purpose, and explores how art can enable people to create and maintain ties within a community to resolve important political and social issues and to act effectively in their engagement with the outside world. He focuses on two complementary examples of active art-producing communities and begins by outlining some of the ways that the Yolngu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land have used art to mediate the impact of European colonisation since the 1930s. He then turns to an examination of the role of the Sydney-based arts organisation Boomalli, established in 1987, in developing a networked community of Indigenous artists across south-eastern Australia. Morphy notes that while Yolngu appear as a community in the sense of being people who live together, Boomalli appears as a community in another sense of the word, as being a dispersed set of people who share interests in common. He concludes by arguing more generally that the arena of public culture—arts exhibitions and awards, cultural institutions and their audiences—provides a framework that enables local communities and

communities defined by shared interests to influence the national agenda and change the face of the nation. Art both enables the creation of local identities and contributes to the building of a cohesive nation by enabling people to communicate to different audiences, and thereby helps create a national discourse.

In her article, 'Writing/righting a history of Australian Aboriginal art', Susan Lowish approaches the subject of Aboriginal art not from the position of social cohesion, as does Morphy, but by highlighting a particular history of exclusion. The article questions the absence of an Aboriginal art history within the wider field of Australian art history and Lowish contends that the perceived 'difference' of Aboriginal art to 'Western art' has been a major stumbling block to the creation of an adequate history of Aboriginal art. The article examines art-historical and anthropological approaches and Lowish claims that while the debates between 'old' and 'new' art history and the lingering disciplinary distinctions between art history and anthropology might contribute to an understanding of the shortcomings and potentialities of 'Aboriginal art history', they do not constitute an adequate platform from which it is possible to delve into the past while maintaining a perspective firmly focused on the future potential of writing about Aboriginal art. This platform can be established only once agreements pertaining to collaboration and consultation have been reached between academics and artists—a move that will also require the renegotiation of normative academic boundaries and an increasing acceptance of interdisciplinary ways of conducting as well as writing research.

While many scholars continue to argue that there is no easy means of rapprochement between Indigenous and Western fields of art production, Aboriginal artists themselves have had little difficulty adopting ideas, styles and techniques to create new artworks. As Ursula Frederick and Sue O'Connor argue, the adoption of new media does not diminish the cultural efficacy of the image. Their article, 'Wandjina, graffiti and heritage: the power and politics of enduring imagery', documents a case study from Perth, Western Australia, in which a graffiti artist began to incorporate Wandjina images derived from Kimberley rock art into his/her contemporary and urban-based graffiti images. The case study demonstrates the complexities of cultural difference and how easily members from one cultural group can transgress the social rules of another without being aware of the implications of their actions. It also, however, puts paid to the idea that cultural differences are necessarily difficult or even impossible to reconcile. There is something to be learned from the fact that the graffiti artist at the centre of the debate responded promptly to Indigenous elders' requests for consultation, when a punitive state law did not stop the artist from doing graffiti in the first place. This 'grassroots' act of negotiation was conducted and concluded by community representatives without government intervention. It raises questions about whose power and authority is heard within communities and how respect can be earned through consultation and

negotiation rather than coercion. Moreover, as the contributors to this volume all suggest, the influence of community and cultural legitimacy is as valid as the implications of legislation and civic authority in the mediation of cultural diversity and cohesion.

ENDNOTES

[1] Ang, Ien 2001, Intertwining histories: heritage and diversity, NSW History Council Lecture, Government House, Sydney, 24 September 2001. Reproduced in full in *Australian Humanities Review*, issue 24, December 2001, viewed 1 May 2009,
<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-December-2001/home.html>

[2] James Jupp quoted in 'Professor Jerzy (George) Zubrzycki remembered', *ANU On Campus Magazine*, 3 June 2009. For more on Zubrzycki's role, see Message, this volume.

[3] Carroll, John et al. 2003, *Review of the National Museum of Australia, Its Exhibitions and Public Programs: A report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. See also the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980* (viewed 4 November 2008, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/nmoaa1980297/>).

[4] See *Australian Journeys*, National Museum of Australia web site, viewed 22 May 2009, <http://www.nma.gov.au/shared/libraries/attachments/corporate_documents/gallery_development_brief/ files/19717/NMA_Exhibition_Brief__Australian_Journeys_and_Creating_a_Country.pdf> and *Collections and Development Plan 2004–2008*, viewed 22 May 2009,
<http://www.nma.gov.au/shared/libraries/attachments/corporate_documents/ collections_gallery_development_2004/files/5116/NMA_Coll_Gallery_Dev_Plan_2004-2008.pdf>

[5] Casey, Dawn 2006, 'Reflections of a national museum director', in Marilyn Lake (ed.), *Memory, Monuments and Museums*, Melbourne University Press in association with the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Carlton, Victoria, pp. 110–23, at p. 112.