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NMA Review Secretariat
Department of Communication
Information Technology and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Sir

I enclose an extract from my *curriculum vitae* to demonstrate my qualifications for making this submission.

I am an Inaugural Honorary Fellow of the National Museum of Australia, but have not been able to visit that museum since its exhibits were installed. I do not therefore comment on the exhibits, but on your terms of reference.

- You are charged to *examine the aims and content of the Museum's exhibitions* and yet your committee does not include historians or museologists. For your information, I enclose a copy of my Inaugural Fellowship Address, *The Virtue of Reality* in which I addressed four challenges faced by the NMA: those peculiar to social history museums and those due to a changing cultural environment, to a changing economic environment and to technological changes. I believe that this document can contribute to your review.
- Clause 1 (i) requires you to determine *whether the Museum has complied with its role and functions as set out in the National Museum of Australia Act 1980, its Charter and other relevant documents*. It may be proper for a government-appointed committee to assess such compliance in reference to administrative and financial performance. I believe that such a committee is not entitled to review content of exhibits.
- Clause 1 (ii) requires you to determine whether the *Government's vision in approving funding for the development of the Museum has been realised*. While the establishment of a National Museum requires vision on the part of a government (although the original vision for the NMA is due to the Pigott Committee of 1975), once it is established it becomes a *national* not a *government* institution. The government's vision does not extend beyond the act of establishment. Only in dictatorships are national cultural institutions required to conform to 'government vision'. The *contents* of exhibits should be subject to *community response*, not to government fiat.
- I have also enclosed an article, 'In defence of museum historians', which develops this argument.

Yours sincerely

David Hutchison

Inaugural Honorary Fellow, National Museum of Australia



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_____ ience and Technology to prepare brief for
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_____ ce at **W. A. Museum**: Member of: Joint
_____ Balladong Living Farm Museum Management
_____ as Chairman), Claremont Museum Management
_____ mmittee on Historical Archaeology, National Trust
_____ Care Museums Management Committee, Sons of
_____ ial Sciences Advisory Committee, W.A. College of
_____ van University), Fremantle Hospital 90th Anniversary

6. Post-retirement career:

1986: Established a **Personal consultancy (EREVNA)** in historical and heritage research and museology. Commissions have included:

- Brief for a film on Fremantle
- **Cocos Island**, to establish a museum on Home Island.
- Research and writing for Claremont Museum, and for National Maritime Museum.
- Occasional lectures in the Public History Programme, Murdoch University and the Heritage Studies programme at Edith Cowan University.
- **Greece**. worked with colleague at the National Folk Museum, Athens.
- Feasibility study for proposed Geological and Mining Museum in W.A.
- Study, for South West Regional Development Authority, on a museum service for the South West.
- A judge for the Bicentennial National Museum of the Year Awards.
- Technical Adviser and Liaison Officer for State Planning Commission for negotiations over the Lou Whiteman Collection
- Member of sub-committee to advise Premier on institution of Premier's Local History Awards.
- Member of organising committee and a judge for Western Australian Museum of the Year Awards.
- Study of proposed Wool Industry Heritage Centre at Tambellup, W.A., for the Wool Foundation Inc.
- Pamphlet on Sporting History of Claremont for Claremont Museum.
- Study (with architect) of the heritage significance of Victoria Quay, for the Fremantle City Council.
- Study of historical sites in East Perth for Department of Planning and Urban Development.
- Conservation and Management Plan for Cossack.
- Member of New Norcia Archives, Research and Publications Committee and of State Taskforce on Museum Policy.
- Lectures to trainee guides for Fremantle Prison.
- A judge for the State Museum Education Awards.
- Engaged by Sydney heritage consultants Penny Pyke and Meredith Walker to provide local historical input for the Fremantle Heritage Assets Management and Data Base Project.
- Employed by Murex Pty Ltd on the preparation of an exhibition for the new Mid West Museum, in Geraldton.

I have published extensively on historical and museological topics

THE VIRTUE OF REALITY

David Hutchison

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An Honorary Fellowship Lecture

delivered at the National Museum of Australia

Canberra, 8 December 1996

Final draft

6.800 words

My brief was to speak *on an issue of personal interest which also relates to the National Museum's three core themes*. I am qualified to speak on the second theme, *Australian Society and History*. However, what I will say may also apply to the other core themes and to museums generally. I will be expressing my own views, not necessarily those of the Council or staff of the Museum.

I have entitled my talk *The virtue of reality*. What I intend by *reality* may be illustrated by a story about Dr Samuel Johnson. I quote Boswell:

After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that everything in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it thus".¹

My use of the word *virtue* will emerge.

My talk will be impressionistic, not only in conveying my impressions but also in style, as there will not be time to substantiate everything. If what I say seems a touch incoherent, that may be because I feel that we seem to be in an incoherent era. That era has become known as *Postmodernity*—a strange word, suggesting that there will never again be a modern era. Shall we come next to *Post-postmodernity*?

Museums now face challenges—some new, some old but changing. I say *challenges* rather than *problems*. However if museums delay facing these challenges, or if governments do not provide the resources to enable them to do so, the challenges may become acute problems. I group the challenges under four headings:

1. Challenges peculiar to social history museums
2. Challenges due to a changing cultural environment
3. Challenges due to a changing economic environment
4. Challenges due to technological changes

1. Challenges peculiar to social history museums

State museums were late to enter the field of social history in Australia, although there were well-established museums of science and technology in Sydney and Melbourne, and the Australian War Memorial (not then formally a museum) dealt with military history. When I was appointed Curator of History at the Western Australian Museum, nearly twenty-seven years ago, I was the first appointment in the field in Australia.

The cultural, economic and technological environments have changed rapidly in the last twenty-seven years. When I took up my post, there was little opportunity to be trained in museology—none in Western Australia. I now know that I was naïve when I accepted my appointment and had to learn on the job very quickly. If I had not been naïve I might have been intimidated by what lay before me.

It is to be understood that, whenever I refer to artefacts or to material culture in this lecture, I am referring to the material evidence of European history in Australia. By the 1970s, much earlier material culture was not available. Fortunately, some local museums hold collections of earlier material and I particularly enjoyed helping the local museums of Western Australia to care for these collections.

History curators have special problems in establishing systematic collections. They depend to a large extent on donations, and they are able to collect only those objects which happened to survive. Objects survive partly by chance, partly by human choices that have biased the material. For example, I soon discovered that it was almost impossible to find working costume, but many families had preserved christening gowns, wedding dresses and fashionable gowns. A curator of history cannot collect comprehensively in a given area in the way that a natural historian can conduct a biological survey in a particular location. I suppose that a curator of history is rather like a palaeontologist; specimens have survived randomly, but—over a period—collections become systematic as gaps are filled in.

I am sure that some of my natural history colleagues thought that I was indulging in unnatural practices and I sometimes referred to myself as the Curator of Unnatural History.

I discovered, through correspondence, with overseas institutions that there was not a highly developed methodology for the collection of material culture as evidence of history—collections tended to be organised as classes of material for stylistic analysis—nor a widely accepted classification system. I had to establish working methods, a classification system and a system for recording data. At the time, computer hardware and software could not provide economic and efficient data processing.

I also discovered that there had been little scholarly research into Australian material culture. Although I had some advantages in having been a physics teacher, after acquiring a degree in engineering, before studying history, I realised that I was not trained to interpret material culture. I believe that it is an advantage for at least some history curators to have ethnographic training.

Early in my museum career I was struck by a display in the Melanesian gallery of the Australian Museum in Sydney. In a small glass case, was an elaborate Australian wedding cake and visitors were invited to think about this cake in the way the displays invited them to think about the material culture of Melanesia.

Is there a social history museum in Australia that systematically researches and displays, for example, the material culture of weddings throughout our history—or of other rites of passage such as funerals?²

We still have much to learn about collecting, researching and displaying material culture. Should social history museums still focus on collections—on objects? Although I agree with some of what Julia Clark wrote in an article entitled 'Any old iron'³, I disagree with two of her assertions:

I believe that this traditional object-focused approach is sterile and exhausted.

and

I must disagree with curators who claim that: 'The exhibits (that is, the objects) are the things people come to see'.

Fresh approaches are needed, but I wish to reassert the object-focused approach. I was pleased to discover, during a visit to France in 1992, that a new museum of folk life in Paris does just that. I do not believe that people come to museums merely to *see* objects. Many museum visitors—possibly most—respond to an object or to a work of art in a more complex way than merely *seeing*. Their responses are mediated—possibly manipulated—by the curators and designers who prepare an exhibit. However, they are not merely passive; they interact with exhibits.

Sometimes a visitor can be surprised to discover that an object can evoke a response that is not due to mediation or manipulation.

I have had many such experiences. I gave examples in an article in *Museums Australia* thirteen years ago.⁴ Let me give another example, which I experienced, in the museum at Olympia in Greece. In a case with other objects, was a Persian helmet which had been brought there as an offering to Zeus in celebration of victory. Someone had punched on the helmet the inscription—in Greek of course—*Taken at Marathon*. I was transfixed by this unexpected confrontation with a relic of the battle that had been one of the great turning points of Western history.

Like Dr Johnson, I had stubbed my toe on a piece of reality.

A few years ago I visited a good friend and former colleague, Martin Hallett of the Science Museum of Victoria, who said something like this, *Our problem is not so much whether we should have hands-on or hands-off displays; our problem is how do we engage our visitors with our exhibits.*

That is what museums must do: they must enable visitors to *engage* with the exhibits as I became profoundly engaged with the Persian helmet, but

there seems to be little research into why, how, or whether museums (and science centres) should exhibit things as they do.⁵

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote one of the best accounts of such an engagement. Rilke went to Paris in 1907—to work as Rodin's secretary—and visited a memorial exhibition of the paintings of Cézanne. Over the next five months, he wrote a series of letters to his wife describing his profound responses.

Four years ago, I stood for a long time in the Orangerie in Paris, in front of a Cézanne painting of a plate of apples, wondering how such a painting could move me so deeply. Rilke helped me to understand. He wrote that Cézanne's

fruits no longer remind you of a gala dinner, they're scattered about on the kitchen table and don't seem to care whether they are beautifully eaten or not. In Cézanne they cease to be edible altogether, that's how thinglike and real they become, how simply indestructible in their stubborn thereness.⁶

It was the *thinglike* quality, the *stubborn thereness* of the Persian helmet that engaged me in the Olympia Museum.

Julia Clark also accused curators of exhibiting objects as if they were icons. This may happen unintentionally sometimes. The blue whale skeleton at the Western Australian Museum and the Strasbourg Clock at the Powerhouse Museum have become popular icons. I see no problem in that.

Most of the objects that I collected while I was a curator *were* icons for the donors. I was often touched that we were being given objects that had been long treasured in a family: a grandmother's teapot, a couple's wedding presents, a christening gown used for several generations, and so on. In a sense, I became a deconstructionist by taking these objects out of their context. Is it possible to restore that context by imaginative display techniques?

Let me give a different example. The Hills Clothes Hoist—the National Museum has a collection of these—has become an Australian icon. Its iconic quality is delightfully exploited in the film *Strictly Ballroom* when the two young dancers rehearse on the flat roof of a building under a Hills Hoist.⁷ By the way, a neon adver-

tisement for *Coca-Cola* in the background was a comment on contemporary Australian culture. It would be appropriate for a museum, in one type of exhibit, to exploit the iconic quality of a Hills Hoist in this way.

However, a Hills Hoist could be exhibited in a very different context. I remember an incredibly crass statement by Paddy McGuinness in *The Australian*. He claimed that one of the factors preventing closer settlement of Australian cities was the housewives' devotion to their Hills Hoists. He said they would not need such spacious backyards if they used electric clothes dryers. The Hills Hoist is much more compact than older clothes lines; it has enabled backyards to be smaller. It uses solar energy to dry and sterilise—without having to use chemicals—the washing. A Hills Hoist could be displayed as an *environmentally friendly, space efficient solar energy device*.

By and large, museums, have not been good at keeping a good archive of previous exhibits and some exhibits can become of heritage value. In Arles, Provence, in 1992 I visited the Museon Arletan, the museum of Provençal folk culture. I met Mme Dominique Serena who had recently been appointed Director. The Museon was founded in the early 1900s by the great poet, Frédéric Mistral, who led a movement to revive Provençal language and culture. He shared the Nobel Prize for literature for 1904 and devoted the award to buying the building for the museum and setting up displays. The museum is still virtually as he created it; many of the labels are in his handwriting. Some of it is cluttered; some of the costume displays, which also exhibit folk customs, are remarkably good. Mistral said that if the people of Provence preserved their national costume they would preserve their language as well. He may have been wrong, but—in pursuit of this aim—he not only collected costume; he also conducted classes in the correct wearing of the costume and issued certificates to those who had completed the course. The collections had not been catalogued adequately and some of the displays needed urgent attention. Mme Serena asked me, 'What do I do?' I suggested that, while modernising the operations of the

museum, and some displays, she should retain much of the original Mistral displays and labels. They are now part of the heritage of Provence.

There may be pressure—subtle or overt—on a curator in a state or national history museum to be, *ipso facto*, a state historian, constrained to present an ‘official view’ of history. Such pressure should not be imposed and should be resisted if it is. However, a museum is a public institution that will not survive if the public do not support it. How far can a museum go—especially a museum of society and history—in challenging the susceptibilities of its visitors? I will return to that point.

2. Challenges due to a changing cultural environment

According to its Vision Statement, the National Museum *collects, interprets and communicates what it means to be Australian*. Embedded in that statement is the concept of *national identity*—a construct that has varied through time, from group to group, and individual to individual. As Richard White has written

When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve.⁸

National identities—however elusive to define—are also under pressure from the globalisation of culture and the economy. I worry, then, that the pressure on universities to focus on vocational training threatens the humanities when those disciplines are essential if we are to understand the changes. If these disciplines are weakened, social history museums will also be weakened.

I suppose that the dominant intellectual fashion is *Postmodernism* which is a cluster of specific *isms*. I am not alone in finding it difficult to understand the meaning—or meanings—of *Postmodernism*. I have found a recently published collection of essays helpful. The editor, Walter Truett Anderson claims that we are

in the midst of a great, confusing, stressful and enormously promising historical transition, and it has do with a change not so much in *what* we believe as in *how* we believe.⁹ ... Currently, postmodern thought is entering into a new growth phase linked to the explosion of information and communications technologies, the global mass-media economy of images ...¹⁰

'Many people,' Anderson says, 'hope that postmodernism—whatever they mean by it—will go away'.

And a lot of them are going to get their wish ... Postmodernisms will come and go, but postmodernity—the postmodern condition—will still be here. It is a major transition in human history, a time of rebuilding all the foundations of civilisation ... We are all emerging from out of the security of our tribes, traditions, religions, and world views into a global civilisation that is dazzlingly, overwhelmingly pluralistic.¹¹

Some welcome and revel in this turbulence of culture, but it can sometimes lead to confusion, even to incoherence. Anderson quotes an amusing example:

An American anthropologist visited Japan during the Christmas season and noticed that the retail merchants there had begun to take a great interest in the symbolism of Christmas. When he wandered into a large department store in Tokyo, he saw a striking example of this: a Christmas display that prominently featured Santa Claus nailed to a cross.¹²

There has been a revolution in the practice of history in Australia within this context. In the immediate post-war period (*late modernity*) social history developed as a major field—by that I mean that historians widened the scope of their studies, moving away from concentration on the power brokers of the world to consider the lives of all groups of society. Groups that had been neglected asserted their right to

reassess Australian history from their viewpoints: feminist history and Aboriginal histories, for example.

It is about time! As Tom Griffiths has written, it was time to *reject the silences in our history*.¹³ Our history was silent—largely so—about the convicts, about the Aborigines, about women, about ethnic groups, about homosexuals and other groups. Australian history was a much narrower field when I studied it at University in the late 1950s. I remember that the staff of the History Department was becoming concerned that they would run out of topics in Australian history for their postgraduate students.

Australia is not alone among nations in its silences.

For most of its existence, the Western intellectual tradition was an unequivocally patrilineal tradition.¹⁴

And, as John Kenneth Galbraith has commented with typical dryness:

[America] has three classes, but only one class ... the middle class, always referred to as the hard-working middle class ... We speak occasionally and cautiously of the rich, who have indeed been getting very rich in recent times. But they are not a class; we do not speak of an upper class. Similarly, we often mention the poor, but there is no lower class, no poor class. Such a designation would be entirely inappropriate. So, to repeat, a middle class, but nothing politically above or below it.¹⁵

In the Postmodern era, these new histories have developed more radical fringes where various postmodern *isms* hold sway. All these new histories make the work of a social history curator richer but also more demanding. I have said that an historian in a state museum should not be made to appear to be an 'official historian'; but how can balance be achieved among the proliferation of new histories? As I suggested earlier, the curator of history has to perform a balancing act: to preserve his

or her intellectual integrity in offering this wider range of history while finding ways to engage a diverse audience.

I believe that all museum exhibits should be 'signed', that is the names of the curators, text-writers and designers who have prepared the exhibit should be displayed prominently. In this way an exhibit will not be seen as a statement by the museum, but as a statement by individual members of the staff who accept responsibility for the content of the exhibit. In short, exhibits, ought to be recognised as a form of publication, subject to review.

There are now backlashes against the findings of the new histories and—in particular—against plurality in our society. I do not agree that free speech has been under challenge in Australia. However, I have come to appreciate that there are some groups who feel that their views have not been heard and they have become resentful.¹⁶

This is an area in which to say anything is to risk being misheard, misread, or misunderstood. I will try to be as clear as I can.

I believe that some of the views now being expressed, are wrong and based on misinformation or lack of information. As Hugh Mackay has written

The simple truth is that we hold far too many opinions about far too many things, and most of those opinions are either pointless or based on such slender evidence that a suspension of judgement would be both wiser and easier.¹⁷

The word *multiculturalism* now means different things to different people. I am reminded of the remark of a character in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*

Words as is well known, are great foes of reality.

The word has been bandied about in so many ways it may now be a foe of reality. Australia has always been culturally diverse. We were silent, above all, about the Aborigines. Obviously, in the non-Aboriginal community, there was a British cultural

hegemony, but within that there was considerable variation in aspirations and values.

Let us not forget, for example, the often bitter sectarian disputes between Catholics and Protestants. Gayla Reid in a recently published collection of short stories¹⁸ writes about growing up in Australia as a pupil at a Catholic School.

On the way home from school we exchange insults with the state school kids.

Catholics, Catholics
eat snails and frogs

We reply with the more esoteric:

Proddies, Proddies
fall off logs.

In this way I learn that one side needs the other, even for the completion of a rhyme.

The term *mainstream Australia* may be another foe of reality. It is supposed to have arisen from a reaction to *political correctness* but is fast becoming the new politically correct term. When the term is used we need to question it, as Richard White questioned the term *national identity*. Sometimes, I suspect that, like the abandoned slogan *White Australia*, it tacitly excludes some groups.

Let us consider just a few examples of people in, say, the earlier part of this century: a Scottish Presbyterian family on a marginal wheat farm in Western Australia, a Welsh coal miner in Wollongong, a Cornish tin-miner in South Australia, a third generation Australian lumper on Fremantle wharves, a German family in the Barossa Valley, an Irish Catholic woman rearing children in a Collingwood slum or a Toorak matron. Each of these would have constructed concepts of personal, community

and national identity with some shared values, with some diverse values. Which of them could claim to be *mainstream*?

We forgot other ethnic groups and their contribution. Eric Rolls asserts that

For the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, the Chinese grew three-quarters of the vegetables eaten in Australia. Perhaps they saved the whole country, not merely the goldfields, from a disaster of scurvy.¹⁹

Perhaps we historians—and other intellectuals—have not communicated well with other groups. Not everyone feels as comfortable as we do with diversity. Some people feel a loss of traditional community values. This loss, which is often real, is not necessarily due to cultural diversity. It may be due to the awful development of modern suburbs that lack small social infrastructures which help to create a sense of *immediate community*. It may also be due to the influences of both Postmodernism and economic rationalism which appear to privilege the multinational or transnational rather than the national. The concepts of *nation state* and *national identity* may not wither away, but they will change and, possibly, become even more fluid.

Australia cannot ever, now, lose its cultural diversity. If we ceased accepting any more migrants, even if we asked migrants to leave the country, Australia would not cease to be multicultural. We would have to ban overseas films and television, overseas books, the Internet, McDonald's, Kentucky fries and *Coca-cola*, baseball and gridiron, to name only a few of the elements of a globalised culture. Which is more significant: a Hill's Hoist or *Coca-Cola*?

I found it bizarre to see a group of youths—all of whom wore baseball caps on back to front, T-shirts bearing the names of American basketball teams, and baggy shorts—taunting some migrants for their perceived *otherness*. (Could this make a tableau for a museum exhibit?)

The National Museum—as well as State history museums—may help people to understand and celebrate our cultural diversity, while they learn more about those qualities that help to define us as Australian.

I did not like the proposed separation, on different sites, of the galleries of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage and Culture and of Australian Society and History. I am glad that all galleries will now be on the same site, but have some misgivings about the Acton site because of its exposure—on a peninsula in the lake—to inclement weather, which may limit the possibility for outdoor displays.²⁰

I am not proposing that museums should have didactic agendas; nor should they be too solemn. My good friend and colleague, Professor Tom Stannage—a former member and Deputy Chair of the Council of this Museum—recently commented on the ‘massive historical changes’ since the 1960s.

... it was youthful rebellion, it was a rejection of Englishmen, England, Empireness, decay and disaster. It shouted a new role for history: for women, environment, black rights and the like

And that is what we have been doing for the past twenty years. So where am I, the historian ever the participant/observer, the outsider in Camus’ sense. Is a twenty year battle ending in victory or is it ending without victors and the trade of history weakened, uncertain of its mission, unable to go back (as the New Right wants), ineffective, a servant of what? And does anyone care? I tire rather of the sound of hate and conflict. I search back across time to hear the voice of joy, however doused it seems by the voice of sorrow. I puzzle over evidence of happiness in the lives of people in the past. We have been better with sorrow than joy these past twenty years. Better with human unhappiness than happiness ... From the mid 1980s I began to worry greatly about the direction I’d gone. But there were momentous battles still raging, and one’s emotions were still too deeply engaged.²¹

I believe that Tom is right, that we still have some way to go to find out what lies behind the silences, but we need to communicate better with people, so that they will come to realise that to probe the silences is one way of improving our under-

standing and does not prevent our celebration of those aspects of our history that we are entitled to celebrate. The new histories enrich us; they do not diminish anyone.

Some years ago I wrote something that may still be pertinent in this context

... although any museum, state or local, must be well run and recognised as a serious undertaking, do not become too solemn. A sense of fun is a valuable human quality; it should not be missing from museums which record past human activities.²²

Museums could help the various groups in our society to appreciate that, in the words of Gayla Reid, *one side needs the other, even for the completion of a rhyme*.

3. Challenges due to a changing economic environment

While our cultural environment is dominated by Postmodernity, our economic environment is dominated by economic rationalism. I have said that both may be inimical to the idea of national identity. As I understand it, the dominant economic culture is based on specific theories such as monetarism, and a messianic belief in the free market.

People are properly anxious about widespread scientific experimentation: the release of the calicivirus, and applications of genetic engineering, for example. They are worried that there may be unexpected side effects. Why, therefore, are communities less sceptical of widespread economic experimentation based on theories that may be less well based than scientific theories? I believe that there have been serious side effects of economic rationalism; endemic high unemployment may be the worst.

It is, by the way, curious that a bad side effect of, say, genetic engineering is usually blamed on the scientists, while the bad side effects of economic theories are often blamed on the victim—such as the ‘dole bludger’.

We are witnessing the rapid erosion of essential public infrastructures. Governments of both major persuasions seem intent, now, to minimise government. Professor Martin Krygier, of the University of New South Wales, persuades me that a civil society requires strong government—at least strong social infrastructures.²³

I am however, today, mainly concerned with the increasing devaluation of public institutions, museums in particular. This devaluation began under the previous Federal Government, but is likely to accelerate under the present Federal and State governments. Government spokespersons commonly talk of the need for short term pain in the interests of long term gain. However, as an economist—I think it was Keynes—once said, we are all dead in the long term.

I believe that many public departments and institutions are now critically understaffed, to the extent that vital clusters of skills are being lost. These clusters will take many years to re-establish—if there is ever that opportunity to do so—particularly as younger professionals are not being recruited in sufficiently large numbers to maintain these skill clusters.

I am aware, through contact with staffs of public institutions—museums, hospitals, schools and scientific departments—that they are becoming increasingly disaffected.

Let me state again that I do not know if my remarks apply to the National Museum. I have had only one brief visit, a year ago, to this institution.

I cannot now analyse all the sources of this disaffection, but let me deal with one issue in particular: the economic rationalist idea of *performance indicators*. I do not believe that the productivity of creative workers and service providers can be measured by bean-counting methods, yet I know that many people now have to spend an inordinate amount of time on just such bean-counting exercises. I suspect that Albert Einstein would not have rated highly on a scale of productivity based on these measures; it is almost impossible to quantify quality.

A recent paper²⁴ has reported on research into the effect on Canadian universities of the application of performance indicators. The findings cited in this paper could

refer, I believe, to other institutions including museums. This paper reports that *managerialism has by now become well embedded* in educational institutions. It has, I am sure, become embedded in all our institutions. One of the results is that professionals are losing control of decision making within their competencies.

Control is being exercised by agents external to the institution itself, through government ministries, through research councils ... and through linkages with (primarily corporate) clients for whom universities design particular research and teaching programmes.

The authors suggest going on the offensive by turning 'the sharp edges of measurement on university administrations and government ministries'. They also say that performance indicators are not neutral measures, they can also be

technologies for managing and controlling the academic activities that flow within and through institutions of higher education ...

The result is that academic judgements are being made increasingly by managers rather than by the academics. But performance indicators assess *process* rather than *content*. The requirement to produce something regularly for assessment tends to force academics to take on small areas of research rather than the more risky long term areas of research that may result in major breakthroughs. In short, a simplistic approach to performance measurement can be destructive of intellectual activity. I suspect that the effect in museums is similar. I met, during a recent trip to another city, a former museum colleague who made just such a complaint: that the role of the curator has been diminished by this excess of managerialism.

Despite some recent large-scale museum developments in Sydney and Melbourne, I have a feeling that museums are becoming marginalised. We may now be confronted by the question, 'Do communities still want or need them?'

Another result of economic rationalism is that museums will be urged to concentrate on attracting tourists. Of course they always have and always should, but I have always believed that tourists are attracted to those museums that do their own thing excellently. However, I am alarmed that there are signs that museums may be forced to become another *tourist commodity*.²⁵

In 1992 I visited Rome, where I spent a very interesting morning with the Director of the Ethnographic Museum in the Vatican Museum. He told me that some Italian galleries and museums have so many visitors now that an admission ticket is valid for only two hours. Obviously museums need many visitors, but I wonder what many of the tourists, marshalled through galleries by a flag-bearing leader, experience during their visit. Economic rationalism requires the museums to be crowded. Many museum visitors may want to be able to spend their time in the galleries quietly, deliberately and contemplatively. Where is the balance between popularity and elitism, between intellectual and professional standards and a tourist commodity?

4. Challenges due to technological changes

I believe that I am not a Luddite. I wrote the text of this talk on a computer; I enjoy the facility of writing with such a device. I wish that present-day computers, with their present applications and capacities, had existed when I started work in a museum nearly twenty seven years ago. I look forward to the day when museums have sufficient resources to put bar-coded tags on their objects so that they can achieve the efficiencies in stock control already enjoyed by supermarkets.

However, new applications in electronics may challenge museums that have already had to face the challenge of moving film and of television. Will the technology of virtual reality make museums redundant, or will museums have to find new ways of responding to this challenge?

It may be possible for museums to employ virtual reality to create an archive of their exhibits. I think it was Betty Churcher, Director of the National Gallery of Aus-

tralia, who remarked some while ago—on the ABC radio programme *Lateline*—that galleries and museums might employ the new technologies to give wider access to collections, allowing the museum to refocus on the objects or art works in exhibits.

Will virtual reality offer a real alternative to the experience of reality? Would I have the same engagement viewing the Cézanne painting in virtual reality as I had while standing in front of it in The Orangerie? I am sceptical, but it has been claimed that

in the 21st century the technology will be such that you will be able to have the experience of actually standing in the museum looking at the painting.²⁶

I agree with David Sless that it is wrong to suggest that only the new technologies are interactive. I have spoken of the viewer's *engagement* with objects—very much an interaction. Sless refers to research that has shown that

people's relationship, even with the traditionally 'passive' medium of television, is highly interactive. It is not a one way process, but a highly active engagement and interpretation.²⁷

There may be downsides to these technological changes. Societies are likely to be divided between the information rich and information poor. I know that, since my retirement, I have had little access to the new technologies. Will we also see too much emphasis—as seems to be happening in libraries—on *provision of information* at the expense of cultural enrichment through access to books and exhibits. I have found starkly opposing views in the books and articles that I have consulted.²⁸ This is a field that is in such a state of flux that few yet have a clear vision of where it is all leading us.

I am uncomfortable with the world of the cyberfreak. Perhaps it will always be a minority culture. The jargon of the cyberfreaks—one scholar calls them the *digerati*—is often chilling. Their word for a human is *meat*; their term for a gather-

ing of people is *flesh meet*; and their label for a face-to-face meeting is *F2F*. There are signs of a detachment from reality that approaches pathology.

Obviously there are good and exciting uses of virtual reality. Ever since Galileo invented the telescope we have developed devices which extend the range of our senses. I think in particular of an example given by Gerard Milburn in his book *Quantum Technology*.²⁹ In this book he gives examples of new technologies that control the uncertainties at the quantum level of matter. One device, already in use, is the Scanning Tunnelling Microscope, referred to as an STM.

The STM has become our hands and eyes to explore the quantum world ... This may sound a little far-fetched, but in fact such a device, called the nanomanipulator, already exists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill ...³⁰

In this device the STM is coupled to virtual reality devices to enable you to have the sensation of a tactile exploration of the surface of a solid at the level of resolution of individual atoms.

However, will virtual reality become a too seductive *substitute for reality*? There is already talk of providing virtual sexual intercourse. (I wonder if virtual AIDS may ensue?)

Mark Slouka³¹ has commented:

What surprises us now, increasingly, is the shock of the real: the nakedness of face-to-face communication, the rough force of the natural world.³² ... computer simulations may soon be so pervasive (and so realistic) that life itself will require some sort of mark of authenticity. Reality, in other words, may one day come with an asterisk.³³

This is already happening. Recently, I watched a fascinating TV documentary on the ABC about the planet Jupiter. This included imagery, and computer-enhanced imagery, from a space probe; computer simulations of the landscapes of Jupiter's moons, and what appeared to be aerial views of terrestrial landscapes intended to

show what some of the Jovian moon landscapes looked like. At no point in the film was there any indication of the nature of the image. No asterisks were provided.

In future, how will historians know whether a photograph, a film, a tape, or a document is genuine or electronically manipulated? Future generations may leave no palimpsests.

I hope—with Slouka—that these 'new transcendentalists', as he calls the cyberfreaks, may be a minority, but they might become a persuasive and powerful minority. Let me quote Slouka again:

My concern, rather, is based on a small number of well-worn truths: that the free market can unleash forces difficult to control; that technological innovation has its own logic, often separate from questions of value and ethics; and that *some* technologies—particularly those that promise (or threaten) to transform human culture as we know it—bear watching.³⁴

Do we need, except for specialised research, access to everything? I would rather engage profoundly with one Cézanne than superficially with his entire *oeuvre*. Anyhow, given the cost and complexity of virtual reality devices, will they be available to the masses? I read recently that—after some fifty years of the ballpoint pen—the fountain pen is enjoying a come back. Some older technologies—such as the book—may prove enduring; perhaps because they may be more immediately engaging.

Conclusion

I believe that there is a common misconception that museums are essentially backward-looking. As I once wrote,

[The] foundation [of a museum] predicates a future for the community which it celebrates.³⁵

It is shameful that successive Federal Governments have not yet provided funds to allow the National Museum to establish its galleries³⁶. Funding should allow for development of opportunities for co-operation with and interaction with State Museums. As you know, when the National Museum was first proposed there was some opposition from the States. I welcomed the proposal, provided that the National Museum developed a special concern with national themes. One way in which the National Museum could co-operate with State Museums would be to arrange to exchange staff—to work on particular exhibitions, for example.

I was invited, in 1975, to Canberra to prepare an exhibition, *The Fourth Part of the World*, which was part of Australia's contribution to the celebration of America's Bicentenary. It was a marvellous opportunity for me to be challenged, and to be away from the daily demands of my desk for a while to concentrate on a single project. At the time there were no museum facilities available and I had to work in a makeshift area in the basement of the then new Trade building. Surely this nation should provide its National Museum with decent facilities for mounting travelling exhibitions and, again, staff from other museums could be seconded to work on these.

I would also like to see a Co-operative Institute of Museology established. I would be happy for that to be attached to the National Museum as an autonomous arm. Staff from other museums could be offered fellowships to spend time at the Institute to research aspects of museology.

None of these proposals would make excessive demands on public funds.

I repeat: museums must be based on collections—of things or of specimens—and that any institution that is not so based is not a museum but something else. History museums, however, have to become better at analysing artefacts. Such analysis can show how artefacts 'embody some of the key ideas and sensibilities of the modern world'.³⁷

I have talked about the challenges as I see them. I fear that museums will not be sufficiently funded to meet these challenges.

If museums continue to be devalued we will, I believe, suffer further diminution of our civil society.

In conclusion, let me give one other example of the way in which I have stubbed my toe on reality. While in France, we visited the chateau where Henri Toulouse-Lautrec spent his childhood. The children's room had plain white plastered walls. On one of the walls the heights, at various dates, of Henri and his siblings were recorded with pencil marks. Henri's marks stopped at a certain height; his siblings continued to grow. Again I was transfixed.

It should now be obvious to you why I chose my title. In the coming Age of Virtual Reality, one of the essential roles of a museum may be to be a place where the visitor can experience *the virtue of reality*.

- ¹ Boswell, James (1952)—*The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, London, Dent, Vol. 1, 292
- ² The film *Muriel's Wedding* was an amusing and touching attempt
- ³ Clark, Julia (1991-992)—Any old iron, in *Museums Australia Journal* 2-3
- ⁴ Hutchison, David (1983)—Material culture and the study of Australian life, *Museums Australia*, December.
- ⁵ Morrison, Rob (1995)—*Science-centred learning*, broadcast by ABC Science Unit, 28.2.96. Typescript from the author, 2
- ⁶ Rilke, Rainer Maria (1991)—*Letters on Cézanne*, edited by Clara Rilke, translated by Joel Agee, London, Vintage, 32-33
- ⁷ It is a symbol for suburbia in the title of an article, Rowse, Tim—Heaven and a Hills Hoist: Australian Critics on Suburbia, in Whitlock, Gillian & Carter, David (1996)—*Images of Australia*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 240-250
- ⁸ White, Richard (1987)—*Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*, Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, viii. See also: Whitlock & Carter, op. cit.
- ⁹ Anderson, Walter Truett (1995)—*The Truth About Truth: de-confusing and re-constructing the Postmodern World*, New York, Putnam, 2
- ¹⁰ *ibid*, 7
- ¹¹ *ibid*, 7-8
- ¹² *ibid*, 1
- ¹³ Griffiths, Tom (1996)—*Hunters & Collectors: the antiquarian imagination in Australia*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 100
- ¹⁴ Tarnas, Richard (1996)—*The Passion of the Western Mind: understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view*, London, Pimlico, 468
- ¹⁵ Galbraith, J.K. (1996)—Truth about American politics, *The Australian*, 7 Oct. 1996, 11
- ¹⁶ Cochrane, Peter (1996)—Race memory, *The Australian's Review of Books*, 1, 3, November. This article came to hand after this talk had been written. Cochrane reminds us that racism has been a pivot of Australia's nationalism in the past, and is expressed in the classics of our literary canon. I hoped that we might not revisit this tradition.
- ¹⁷ Mackay, Hugh (1996)—Welcome to the rant race, *The Australian*, 15 April 1996
- ¹⁸ Reid, Gayla (1996)—*To Be There With You*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 21
- ¹⁹ Rolls, Eric (1996)—*Citizens: Flowers and the Wide Sea*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 63
- ²⁰ The text has been altered here because the decision about the site was announced a few days after the date of delivery of the lecture
- ²¹ Stannage, Tom (1993)—New Norcia in History, *New Norcia Studies*, New Norcia, April 1993, 7
- ²² Hutchison, David (1985)—Before you start, in Bennington, Seddon (Ed), *Handbook for Small Museums*, Perth, Western Australian Museum, 5

²³ Krygier, Martin (1996)—The sources of civil society, *Quadrant*, No 330, XL, 10, October & No 331, XL, 11, November.

²⁴ Polster, Claire & Newson, Janice (1996)—*Don't Count your Blessings: the social accomplishments of performance indicators*, Paper presented to the Ninth World Congress of Comparative Education, University of Sydney, 1-6 July, 1996.

²⁵ Unfortunately, this seems to be the fate of many heritage projects in Australia

²⁶ McFadyen, Ian (1995)—Bound for Binary Bay—Colonising the New World, *Museum National*, 4, 2, November, 4

²⁷ Sless, David (1995)—Mistakes about multimedia, *Museum National*, 4, 2, November, 9

²⁸ See for example: George Steiner (1996)—Can we read our future, *The Australian's Review of Books*, 1, 1, September and Peter Craven's reply, 'The future is now' in the subsequent issue.

²⁹ Milburn, Gerard (1996)—*Quantum Technology*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin.

³⁰ *ibid*, 45

³¹ Slouka, Mark (1995)—*War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the high-tech assault on reality*, New York, Basic Books,

³² Slouka, *op. cit.*, 3

³³ *ibid*, 7

³⁴ *ibid*, 15

³⁵ Hutchison, David (1986)—Bay View Terrace; scenes from my boyhood, *Claremont Diary 1987: Bay View Terrace/ One hundred years*, Friends of the Claremont Museum

³⁶ The Federal Government announced funding a few days after the lecture was delivered; the delay remains shameful

³⁷ Spufford, Francis & Uglow, Jenny (Eds) (1996)—*Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention*, London, Faber & Faber. This is another book that came to hand too late; essays in it are interesting examples of such analysis.

IN DEFENCE OF MUSEUM HISTORIANS

DAVID HUTCHISON

An article
3 pages
1,000 words

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IN DEFENCE OF MUSEUM HISTORIANS

DAVID HUTCHISON

The role of museum curators of social history is still evolving in Australia. When I was appointed Curator of History at the Western Australian Museum in 1970, it was the first appointment in the field in any Australian state museum. At the time, there were no courses in museology and curatorship had to be learnt on the job. I learned quickly, as I had to develop exhibitions for the Fremantle Museum, due to open within seven months of my appointment. Fortunately I had the support of a very talented exhibition staff and we developed exhibitions incorporating artefacts, text and graphics which set a style still in use.

I discovered that, in Australia, there was no recognised methodology for curators of social history in museums and I had to develop a system for recording data that placed objects in an historical context. At that time—only thirty years ago—computer hardware and software could not provide economic and efficient data processing for this purpose

Museum curators essentially have to develop exhibits based on artefacts and few historians are trained in the interpretation of material culture; I still advocate such training. I also discovered that curators of history have special problems in establishing systematic collections. They depend to a large extent on donations, and they are able to collect only those artefacts which have survived partly by chance, partly by human choices that have biased the material—which is true to some extent of all records of human activity.

A curator of history cannot collect comprehensively in a given area in the way that a natural historian can conduct a biological survey in a particular location. I suppose that a curator of history is like an archaeologist, having to collect artefacts that have survived randomly, in the hope that—over a period—collections will become systematic as gaps are filled. As Francis Bacon wrote, '*Antiquities are history defaced, or some remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time.*'¹ Most social history museum collections in Australia have some way to go to be comprehensive and systematic, despite the endeavours of the curators.

In 1996, following my appointment as one of the Inaugural Honorary Fellows of the National Museum of Australia, I delivered an address in Canberra, which gave me an opportunity to reflect on some achievements and on the work that still needed to be done. I expressed concern that

There may be pressure—subtle or overt—on a curator in a state or national history museum to be *ipso facto*, a state historian, constrained to present an ‘official’ view of history. Such pressure should not be imposed and should be resisted if it is. However, a museum is a public institution that will not survive if the public do not support it. How far can a museum go—especially a museum of society and history—in challenging the susceptibilities of visitors?

There is nothing wrong in challenging those susceptibilities, as long as the exhibit is based on good scholarship. Historians, in museums and in academies, are right to address areas of our history which have had little attention until recent decades. I said that

Social history museums could help people to understand and celebrate diversity. I am not proposing that museums should have didactic agendas, or that they should be too solemn. Too few museum exhibits have any sign of humour...or of joy.

We seem to be afraid of vigorous open debate in Australia. As soon as a member of a political party questions some aspect of that party’s policy, the media whip up a story about a ‘split’ in that party instead of welcoming debate. It is healthy in a democracy for views to be challenged. A museum exhibition is a form of publication; however it is a special form, based on artefacts and essentially visual, otherwise it will be overwhelmed with text. We still have much to learn about how visitors respond to museum exhibitions, particularly how they respond to the artefacts.

Modern technologies help, but cannot replace the essential base of those exhibitions: the collection of artefacts. The curator, however, can not employ in an exhibit the full range of scholarly apparatus: the opportunity to argue at length and to cite sources, although this can be done in supplementary publications. Museum exhibits are, inevitably, *constructs*, but probably no more so than written histories. I proposed that

all museum exhibits should be 'signed', that is the names of the curators, text-writers and designers who have prepared the exhibit should be displayed prominently. In this way, an exhibit will not be seen as a statement by the museum, but as a statement by individual members of the staff who accept responsibility for the content of the exhibit. In short, exhibits ought to be recognised as a form of publication subject to review.

I should add that the names of those who may have edited the texts must also be revealed. By review, I mean normal scholarly review combined with visitor comment. I am deeply concerned that the Federal Government has appointed a committee to assess whether displays in the National Museum of Australia are biased or have distorted our history. Three eminent scholars, Geoffrey Bolton, Graeme Davison and John Mulvaney have already assessed the controversial exhibit and found that, with trivial exceptions and within the constraints imposed by the available material, the curators have shown excellent awareness of the findings of social and cultural historians and have put together a convincingly representative selection of Australian experiences.

The appointment assumes that there is an acceptable history to which everyone must adhere and it is alarmingly close to the establishment of Thought Police. It also implies that the government has little faith in the ability of the community to accept challenge and to respond to it critically. Why should only museum historians be subject to review by a politically appointed committee? Scholars at other institutions, such as art galleries, or even at universities, should be alarmed that this precedent has been set.

¹ Bacon, Francis, *The Advancement of Learning*, 1605, bk.2, ch. 2, sect. 1