REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION BY ANGUS TRUMBLE

I wish to make the following submission in connection with DCITA's 2003 Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

My thoughts about the NMA are largely the product of having for many years visited dozens museums all over the world, either out of interest or through my work as Curator of European Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide (1996 to 2001). However, I should also make it clear that I have had no professional contact with the NMA staff other than as an ordinary visitor, and it is in that capacity, not so much as an art museum curator, that I wish to comment on the building and aspects of the display, which I have studied carefully in the course of five visits in February and March this year.

Despite the robust nature of many of my criticisms, I should say that I welcome the long-awaited arrival of the NMA. I believe it has a vital role to play in the cultural life of the nation, and the many problems that it must now solve are no more than temporary setbacks. None, apart from the terrible building, is insoluble, and even the building can be improved, I think, beyond measure.

The architecture

The design of the new NMA building is very poor and will not, I think, serve the long-term exhibition needs of the NMA. Nor will it open up new possibilities for public programming in the long term. There is no

room for expansion. Already some thin metal panels on the exterior have been damaged or squashed out of shape, something that is particularly visible near the main entrance. The brash surface effects, which from the design point of view appear to lean heavily on CAD technology, are mostly trivial. For example, sentences and phrases in Braille have been stamped into the metal panels on the exterior. Louis Braille invented his system of writing in the 1820s, using combinations of six raised dots to transcribe letters and words so that they might be 'read' with their finger tips by blind people. To take this remarkable system, a great humanitarian achievement, and turn it into a *visual* motif, raised ten, sixteen, twenty-five feet overhead, without translation, seems particularly offensive given its origin and purpose.

I tried to find out about this feature through the NMA website which I found fussy, ugly and overdesigned. Having drawn a blank, I telephoned the NMA. The operator told me that among the phrases dotted around the building the colloquialism "mate" is repeated several times and that contrary to popular belief the word "sorry" was not to be found. The operator offered to post me a full transcription photocopied from a newspaper article. I also sought information from reliable colleagues in Canberra. Two astonishing explanations were offered, namely that the Braille is an encoded reflection on (1) the holocaust, and (2) the accident in which a little girl was killed when the old hospital was demolished. I cannot believe that either explanation can be true and I think it is incumbent on the NMA to set the record straight, possibly through a FAQ page.

The entrance foyer is enormous compared with the space given to exhibitions and permanent displays, and does little to communicate what visitors will see at the NMA, nor which themes they may be encouraged to consider. The design aims at what might be called the 'Bilbao effect', but employs cheap materials on hollow surfaces that sound like cardboard when tapped with the knuckle. Fortunately I am tall enough to reach these without a stepladder. There is a shop, naturally, and a café,

and places to *get* information, and plenty of staff offering it (too many I think), but the pictorial elements fastened to the ceiling seem unnecessarily obscure, and there are no objects or eloquent display materials to capture your interest as soon as you cross the threshold. Most museum professionals know how tremendously important this is, and 'Welcome to Woop-Woop' frankly means nothing to a visitor from Finland. Nor does it mean anything to me. This may well be a 'high–low' issue, but the popular films of Stephan Elliott must surely struggle to gain admission even to the 'low' category and, despite protestations, in my opinion *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* has nothing remotely valuable to say about, to or for Aboriginal Australians, gay men and lesbians, the relationship between town and country, or the land. The NMA *must* aim higher than this.

The Garden of Australian Dreams is simply awful. Banal gimmicks like the quarter-acre block, the superimposed maps, the planting of deciduous trees so that they slant (deeply disrespectful to the trees, which in due course will stand themselves up regardless), the little cement Tasmania in the pond and those irritating snippets of Braille overhead – all of these things crowd around bewildered visitors much as a hundred television sets bombard them with noise inside the display areas. I watched two families totter across the concrete like transit passengers at a Japanese airport. It is plainly not a garden, and I cannot imagine how anyone could have thought that this depressing, saucer-shaped pavement could serve to illuminate any but the most disturbed Australian dreams.

Circa

This mercifully brief presentation, or something like it, is clearly essential if the NMA's three themes of *land*, *nation* and *people* are to be given any rational exegesis beyond the power of the displays to do so on their own (which is not large). And I thought the impressionistic effect of the video was somewhat reminiscent of Godfrey Reggio's film

masterpiece *Koyaanisqatsi*, and therefore good if weakly derivative. (Come to think of it, why not run a season of *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Powaqqatsi* and *Naqoyqatsi*? Never was their visual and musical poetry more necessary than today, and when I saw Philip Glass conduct a live performance of *Koyaanisqatsi* at the Festival of Sydney a few years ago it was very warmly received.)

I cannot watch more than one TV at once, and I found that paying attention to four expensive, flat, wide-screen monitors going up and coming down then going up again made me feel sick. One of the screens in the final section was out of order. I thought the various juxtaposed images and utterances were paired in clumsily bite-sized clichés. Many of the 'everyman' ruminations were not profound or provocative or revealing or memorable, just plain bonkers. "We can do anything," says one gormless youth. She means "we as a people". Everybody with a brain knows that this is not and cannot be true. It is the language of the hockey coach, the advertising executive or the property developer, all of whom have their uncomplicated reasons for saying so, and persuading others to believe them. But it should not be part of the message of a grown-up National Museum with substantial things to say about land, nation and people. Indeed today we may draw on at least thirty years of uninterrupted debate about issues of national identity. Australians seem to rake over little else.

The displays

In general, I found the signage throughout the Museum hard to read and difficult to sort and prioritise. *Tangled Destinies* is perhaps the most illegible introductory sign, way overhead. Lighting might improve this, but I doubt it. It would be better to lower the existing sign or make a new one that doesn't recede into the adjacent shadows. Frequently signage on glass collides with the text panels or labels beyond it. Sometimes the exhibits or objects themselves have writing on them. Labels push forward or recede to planes nearer the rear wall of a display

case, or else lie on the floor or tilt in different directions. The eye has trouble fixing on 'the important thing'. Guidance and clarity are often sorely needed but inexplicably withheld. There is a lot of clutter. At the same time there may be loud commentary coming from audio or video equipment nearby. Many of these compete with each other. I found it very difficult to sift all this, to make sense of the sequence of displays and, at times, to discern what exactly was going on within single vitrines.

For example, elsewhere, in the display called *On the Wheat Frontier*, there is an original, leatherbound copy of Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1803), on loan from the National Library of Australia. The book is propped on a perspex stand, apparently to lend credence to Blackstone's remarks printed alongside: "And thus the legislature of England has universally promoted the grand ends of civil society…by steadily pursuing that wise and orderly maxim of assigning to everything capable of ownership, a legal and determinate owner…" etc. (Incidentally, that first ellipsis stands for the deleted words between commas "the peace and security of individuals" whose excision Blackstone would have regretted, as I do most vigorously on his behalf. After all, civil society is made up of individuals no less today than in the late eighteenth century. Unlike the person here wielding the editorial pencil for the NMA, Blackstone, a great lawyer, weighed *every single word*, which is presumably the reason why we should care about his book.) But in the end the point is no more than a tedious sidetrack relating to the law of freehold property, as it relates to the cultivation of wheat. This is drawing a very long bow indeed.

There are numerous examples of books such as Blackstone's *Commentaries* or the three volumes of Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (also lent by the NLA) that are used as purely decorative display objects, not even opened at a particularly important passage. This totem principle is, I am afraid to say, shallow and, besides, inconvenient to readers who might actually wish to consult

the relevant volume across Lake Burley Griffin at the National Library of Australia.

There are also many examples of text that simply hangs in mid-air. A good example, and one which maddened me for personal reasons, is a remark about trees retaining their leaves but shedding their bark, which appears as an isolated passage of sentences written on glass near the entrance to *Tangled Destinies*. It is attributed to "J. Martin, 1830s." Now, my own research has recently brought to light some remarks in the goldfields diary of the artist Thomas Woolner. He too noticed that trees retain their leaves but shed their bark, and wrote home about it to his fellow Pre-Raphaelites D. G. Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. So I was particularly anxious to trace this far earlier text in the *Tangled Destinies* gallery. Could Woolner have known it? I don't know and cannot know, because having dangled it so temptingly, the NMA transcribes this morsel of text from an unnamed source, without telling you anything about J. Martin. Nor is it entirely clear what point is being made here except that trees are different in Australia from their cousins in Madagascar or Hawaii, which should come as no surprise to most visitors who have been to primary school.

The objects on display are at times woefully ill-served by the labels. An example which caught my eye simply because I happened to know all about it, ought to illustrate the general problem. A little way into the *Tangled Destinies* gallery there is a satin-lined jeweller's presentation case containing a British imperial decoration which is described in the accompanying label as "James Youl's medals, 1860s." A photograph labelled "James Youl, *c.* 1860" is reproduced above the insignia, in which he appears to be wearing something similar, though obviously not the same. Sir James Youl, who is best known for having introduced trout and salmon into Australian waters, was in 1874 made a companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG). That is the decoration he wears on his left breast in the photograph, which cannot therefore be earlier than that date – a good fourteen years later than the label says.

Then in 1891, Youl was promoted to Knight Commander of the same order of chivalry (KCMG). The knight commander's badge, which is suspended from a ribbon worn around the neck, and the star, which is pinned onto the left breast, are the insignia on display. They are not the same as the CMG decoration in the photograph, they are emphatically not military medals and they must be a good thirty years more recent than the label implies.

In the late nineteenth century the Order of St Michael and St George was generally used by the British government to honour (or more accurately reward) minor colonial officials and colonists for services of many kinds, the more senior orders of chivalry such as the Order of the Bath, the Order of the Thistle, the Order of the Garter and so on, being out of reach. Incidentally, the star and badge are decorated with the cross of St George, the Order's motto, *Auspicium melioris aevi*, which is Latin for 'Token of a better age', and have a representation of the archangel St Michael trampling on Satan. All of these facts may be gleaned in five minutes from the article about Sir James Youl in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and *Burke's Peerage*. In other words, there is no reason why the NMA labels should contain such dreadfully inaccurate dates. When labels are as wrong as this, your faith in every text, the intellectual superstructure of the whole enterprise, is severely shaken.

I was glad to see that in the upstairs section called *The Idea of Empire* the commonest errors relating to the Union Flag were here deftly avoided, namely (1) hanging it upside down, something that occurs surprisingly often and not always outside England, and (2) forgetting that in 1788 the Union Flag contained no red diagonals, *i.e.* the flag of St Patrick was not incorporated until 1802. Bravo! In one of the drawers there was a copy of *Commonwealth School Paper Class 3* relating to Empire Day, May 1909, yet another book whose museological function, it seems, is to be judged by its cover. Empire Day, which was invented in 1903 as a convenient method of continuing to celebrate the late, lamented Queen Victoria's birthday, fell on the 24th, and there would be no harm in giving the date

or explaining its origin. Naturally there is no need to acknowledge Reginald Brabazon, 12th Earl of Meath, the crackpot Anglo-Irish peer who came up with the idea. Unfortunately, in *The Idea of Empire* there was an empty display case with a crumpled apology inside.

I repeat, these criticisms are offered in the best possible faith and with my best wishes to the National Museum of Australia, which it seems to me has an ever more important and responsible role to play in preserving our national memory. I am instinctively wary of those critics of the Museum who seek dark political conspiracies, hidden agendas, etc., of which I have found no evidence. This 'Windshuttle' material is not helpful, and the media love its seductive one-dimensionality.

All agendas, if they can be called that, seem to me transparently visible, and in many cases depressingly banal. I think the Museum has a real opportunity at this moment to take a conscious decision not to follow the frightful blueprint of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, whence many of the current NMA display problems appear to have been derived with uncritical enthusiasm. Te Papa's is an example that should be avoided at all costs.

As a child I was deeply affected by my visits to the Museum of Victoria. In some respects I suppose it embodied everything that is today seen as 'boring', that kiss-of-death label so often applied by ignorant people to things they do not understand or wish to learn about. Huge display cases crammed with rare fossils or minerals or sea shells are unfashionable. Yet they offered children (among others) a vista of limitless knowledge, freely available, unmediated – grist to the ceaseless intellectual mill of the adolescent mind. Basic information was given; commentary and interpretation kept to a minimum. There was plenty of silence so you could concentrate. I was lucky. My school encouraged me to go into town and do what I had to do at the Museum, on some occasions giving me the tram fare in cash. I have no doubt that is why I am today a museum curator.

Nobody in their right mind would expect the twenty-first century NMA to resemble its natural-history museum ancestors of 1950s or 1960s. Yet I hope some thought will be given to making accessible a greater proportion of the permanent collection, and displaying it without as much noise and choreography. The Open Collection is very good. Why not keep it open all the time, not just ten to fifteen minutes every hour?

I would be glad to expand or elaborate further on any of these matters should the Review Panel seek clarification.

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