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Factors leading to the establishment and development of three public art spaces concerned with contemporary art in the 1980s in Melbourne

**Abstract of thesis**

This study involves an account of the factors leading to the development and evolution of three public art spaces concerned with contemporary art in the 1980s in Melbourne. The three spaces – Heide Park and Art Gallery, 200 Gertrude Street, and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art developed programs that promoted and presented contemporary art throughout the eighties. Prior to the 1980s the National Gallery of Victoria was the major public institution concerned with the promotion and presentation of contemporary art in Melbourne.

The study describes and analyses events leading to the establishment of each new space and investigates the formations and groups who played leading roles. A case study approach has been used which explores the networks and groupings that developed in setting up and maintaining each
space. Theoretical perspectives drawn from Bourdieu, Williams and Wolff are employed in order to explore the social and cultural meanings of the networks and groups responsible for developing the three art spaces. These perspectives are used to help account for the motives and ideology employed by individuals and groups, such as artists, academics and politicians.

Each of the three spaces mainly developed from different clusters and groups, although some individuals had involvement in more than one of the spaces. The study concludes with a cultural analysis that identifies several key factors, such as forms of patronage, government policy direction and the power and influence of various sectors and formations. Government funding for art is a complex area of activity that draws upon a wide constituency of individuals and agents that include artists, wealthy business people, collectors, and so on. The study reveals much about government intervention and cultural and social formations promoting art in Melbourne during the 1980s.

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**Specific background to the PhD topic selected**

In 1975 I was an art student who was caught up in a protest staged at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). The little known incident followed an artists meeting at the George Paton Gallery, Melbourne University where prominent contemporary artists rallied in support of Domenico De Clario. The National Gallery of Victoria had organised a series of peer sponsored exhibitions called *Artists’ Artists* and De Clario’s installation had been packed up and placed in a storage cupboard on the instructions of the director, without the artist being consulted or informed beforehand.

The installation near the Australian art collection was deemed by the director as harmful to the works nearby, but this aspect had not been
discussed with the artist. The event angered many contemporary artists leading to the protest staged at the NGV. The protest extended beyond De Clario and his work to raise a more significant and underlying concern. Namely, the NGV was seen as being unsupportive and out of touch with contemporary art.

Calls for a dedicated public space for contemporary art was promoted by the artists. An artists’ representative group was established and they liaised with the NGV senior staff. In the short term a curator was appointed in 1976 to the NGV and he set about staging a series of exhibitions that sought to inform and educate audiences to the work of practising contemporary artists. This appointment went some way to soothing the anger directed at the NGV, however there was still a core of artists concerned to establish a separate public institution devoted to contemporary art.

In the 1980s three, not just one, new, publicly funded art institutions interested in promoting contemporary art came into existence — Heide Park and Art Gallery, Bulleen (1981); the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, South Yarra (1984); and, 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy (1985). The shift in emphasis intrigued me; why should such spaces come into existence in the eighties, when in the seventies one space could not happen? This fundamental question, driven by my understanding of events in the seventies, became the basis of my PhD research.

Selection of university
Armed with this question I considered which University to approach. Having completed a Masters degree at LaTrobe I was attracted to one of my principal supervisors who I found informed, challenging and passionate about the arts. Further, he was particularly knowledgeable in cultural theory, which enriched my interest in the role and operation of contemporary art practice in society. The choice of supervisor proved to be a good one as
he continually probed and pushed my assumptions and assertions, always ensuring that connecting points were pursued rigorously.

**Importance of the supervisor/s**

The choice of supervisor is critical in higher degree research, particularly at PhD level. Firstly, as the research is concentrated and you are living with it constantly, you need a good supervisor who is genuinely interested in your topic and findings along the way. You build up a strong rapport with your supervisor as research becomes a lonely exercise. Your supervisor is the one who rides the bumps with you as they guide your journey. Secondly, you need a good critical voice that ensures that you are focussed, stick to the topic and condense your approach, rather than becoming too broad in following every side issue that crosses your path. Thirdly, you need a supervisor that reads your work quickly, but diligently, so that you are not left in limbo too long, and can quickly address any shortcomings.

Fourth, the supervisor should be accessible so that when you initiate contact you are not left in the lurch or put off too long. My supervisor was always available, except when he took extended leave at one critical point in the research. Fifth, you need someone who challenges your findings so that you maintain a critical perspective and grow through the process. I had a researcher who always generated questions and forced me to continually reassess my findings and assumptions. Sixth, a well informed supervisor can suggest additional readings or theoretical perspectives that help frame and locate your material more cogently. Whilst the candidate becomes the expert in the topic a strong supervisor can provide a more objective voice to the writing. It was suggested by my supervisor that I discuss my material with an acknowledged expert on Australian art. This I did, and the assistance proved most valuable in reassessing one of my cultural theoreticians in the context of my findings.
Seventh, you need a sympathetic person who has been through the troughs and lows of higher degree research and can keep the flame alive. PhD research can be exhilarating and affirming, but as the journey is unchartered and lengthy, it is inevitable that enthusiasm can sometimes wane or one can feel overwhelmed by the task. Family members can be sympathetic to a point, but without having been through the process they cannot fully appreciate your frustrations.

Eighth, a good supervisor can suggest conferences where you can present findings, test assumptions and network with other higher degree candidates and academics. Presenting your research to people unfamiliar with your work means that you are forced to think clearly and concisely about your material, and be open to criticism and scrutiny. Whilst daunting the experience can assist in advancing your research as you seek to refine your material. Questions such as, Have you thought about….? Or, have you read…? can widen your options. We are all limited by our experiences, so that additional insights viewed critically can be valuable. Not all advice is necessarily good but at least it throws up some areas for consideration. Attendance at conferences proved valuable as I quickly realised that you are not alone in the trials and tribulations faced in the research process. Similarly, writing up findings and then submitting to a scholarly, refereed journal in the field, can open up some valuable criticism and points for reflection and refinement.

Originally I had two supervisors. The second supervisor proved to be problematic as she had a very senior appointment in a tertiary institution and was often too busy to be attentive to my research. Drafts written would be unread, and when meetings were set I would end up discussing the material and not the writing. I ultimately took the decision to go with one supervisor, not a sound strategy but one that ultimately worked in my case, despite the significant mistakes made by forging on alone when my supervisor was on leave.
As a post-script aside, I am a supervisor of higher degree candidates myself. All candidates in the institution where I teach must have a supervisory panel of three for a PhD. This arrangement means that candidates can work off the strengths of each supervisor, and be guaranteed of a continuity of supervision if one or two supervisors are on leave. The principal supervisor takes the main role in the panel and addresses the difficulty, if it arises, of the candidate receiving conflicting information. Different people will notice different things which can open up areas within the research for consideration.

The research question
Returning to my PhD experience, the fundamental question framed by my research topic did not change significantly. At one level the study was a historical overview documenting the development and establishment of three new art spaces. That overview meant sourcing primary documents, identifying and interviewing key personnel, and sourcing secondary articles, interpretations and newspaper material. At another level, various cultural theories and sociological perspectives were necessary in order to culturally map and account for the form of the institutional structures, and the positions taken by individual stakeholders. The chosen methodology was that of a case study approach, with cultural theory providing an overlay and link between the three separate institutions.

In the initial stages I set about researching each institution separately. I systematically established contact with an institution discussing my project, interviewing key people, such as directors and curators, requesting papers, letters and documents, which in turn opened up further avenues to explore. As I was studying part time the process was lengthy. A trap that one can fall into is imagining that the hard work is the data and information collection, with the writing falling into place. The writing needs to be addressed carefully as it demands rigour and direction.
The trials and tribulations of research

Into the fourth year of my research my supervisor went on extended leave. Up to this point I had regularly discussed my findings outlining the details of each institution. In his absence I began refining my material culminating in writing over 230,000 words. On his return, much to my dismay, he noted that I had material sufficient for developing two PhDs. Not through quantity and volume of words, but through the range of ideas that I had foregrounded in the writing. Needless to say quality rather than quantity needs to be carefully addressed in the research. In addition, the problem was that the material I had written was interwoven throughout the 230,000 words, so that I needed to tease out and locate a core theoretical perspective so as to better contextualise my findings. It was not a case of halving the writing and submitting two PhDs. In short, in my supervisor’s absence I had blindly steamed forward, writing furiously, while being too broad in intent.

I had been over zealous in the writing and detailing of each institution, and needed to revisit the material to reclaim the primary focus; easier said than done. Having arrived at this point was the nadir of my experience in doing the PhD. Thoughts of giving it away crept into my mind. However, more objectively I reflected on the fact that I had invested so much time and energy to the project. I was determined not to throw it all away.

Research by its very nature takes one into unchartered territory; that is part of its attraction. You interview someone or read an article about something and it suggests another angle or insight or possible direction to take next. That becomes the energising aspect of research, as opposed to the necessary drudge work that can sometimes become overwhelming. A PhD, amongst many things, is a degree achieved through effort, determination and persistence.

To refocus I went back to my visual background and developed a concept map that plotted the structure and form of each space, fleshed
out the broader matrix of art world players within a sociology of culture – artists, bureaucrats, politicians, academics, curators, critics, gallery directors, writers, teachers, and then explored points of intersection, such as individuals who had involvement in more than one of the institutions. This meant taking an overview of contemporary art practice in the 1980s and locating the institutions within that frame. The material was contextualised through backgrounding the initiatives in the seventies that led to the final establishment of each institution, although Heide Park and Art Gallery was an evolution of much earlier activity leading back to the Reed circle and their involvement in Melbourne’s first Museum of Modern Art from 1958 to 1965. Cultural theory provided a conceptual overlay that assisted in accounting for various positions taken and adopted by proponents for each institution.

A valuable means of refocussing was assisted by two aspects. One was the presentation of a colloquium to a panel which included the supervisor and two outsiders who were not directly familiar with my work. The other was the use of a critical friend who had completed a PhD in the arts and read my material, critically and purposefully.

The colloquium was a daunting but extremely valuable exercise. It meant that I had to focus quickly and purposefully, organise my material cogently and clearly, and express my ideas with clarity. I had to demonstrate my knowledge of the field, and locate my material in a manner that allowed people not familiar with my research to comprehend the nature, form and purpose of my project. It was also important to fully comprehend that a discernable shift in focus from some dependence on the supervisor, to being more responsible and independent in the direction of the research, was occurring. Obviously as a candidate I would initiate the times of meeting with my supervisor but the material I was amassing meant that I was becoming the expert on the topic.
Working practices

The working pattern and procedure adopted was important in maintaining momentum and focus in the PhD research. Random grabs of time were only effective when engaging in interviews or reading primary and secondary documents. A regular routine is essential in the writing process so that it becomes habitual. It is also valuable to set aside a dedicated space for writing, with documents and articles accessible and carefully labelled, whether in a filing cabinet or pamphlet box. Habit forming behaviour means that the writing becomes second nature. Mental purpose is also critical so that when you do sit down to work, you actually work, and not try and avoid or put off the process. Being organised and focussed through habitual practice potentially guards against procrastination and avoidance strategies. Immersion in the writing process is important in maintaining a consistent voice. I set aside a dedicated day for writing, or if possible, two consecutive days, as it was easier in maintaining some momentum and not spending time trying to recapture where I last left off. Studying part-time meant that I could not always guarantee continuity. A frustrating aspect was after gathering some momentum in the writing I would have to put things on hold due to work commitments. Study leave for a semester enabled me to write consecutively and consistently; immersion in the writing proved invaluable I would also ensure that I had a break every two hours or so, get up, move around, have a cup of coffee or tea so as to avoid fatigue, and come back to the writing with a fresher perspective.

Research can be daunting as you have a rudimentary road map that starts at one point and finishes at another. How long you take the journey, how many stops and side trips you take, or different routes you may try out, there are always startling and unexpected vistas presented. In my research the most memorable occasions occurred when conducting interviews; someone would tell you something that had not
been divulged previously, or a letter not publicly seen before provided new insights and information. The other point of exhilaration was when the end of the writing was in sight. Throughout the research process it seemed like approaching absolute zero; the closer you got the further away it seemed. However, when the conceptual and case study material began to gel, and the concluding chapter was being written, the end was definitely in sight.

**The writing**

An annoying question often asked over the journey is – How long before you finish? Or, Are you almost there? When you are embedded in the research the completion is unknown. You work towards an administrative deadline, but as you are working in unchartered waters, the final finishing line shimmers like a mirage – you see it but then you don’t. At this point one also needs to be pragmatic and avoid trying to read new material, unless compelling and critical to your fundamental argument.

Fundamental to the PhD is not the data and information gathering but rather how you make sense of the material in the writing up of the thesis. Two problems can arise – overestimating what constitutes a PhD, or the opposite, underestimation. In my case I had overestimated what was required and had so much material and wrote so much, that two potential PhDs were possible. The writing process can take longer than you think as you agonise over every sentence, re-evaluate your structure, and ensure that the citation and bibliographic material is consistently maintained and appropriate. Computer programs such as Endnote were unavailable when I was undertaking my research. The Endnote program is an excellent aid in organising and collating data entries, thus reducing some of the less glamorous facets of research. Whilst computers are valuable it is essential to back up any writing, and to clearly mark the particular version of each
draft. If nothing else a PhD demands that you are organised and systematic in the way that you collect and organise your material.

**Post–PhD from candidate to supervisor**

After completion of my PhD I have been involved in several successful PhD supervisions of a conventional, and practice/exegesis form. The practice/exegesis model has proved an attractive option for visual arts practitioners. The studio practice work and the exegesis taken together constitute the thesis. I will now suggest aspects relating to the practice/exegesis model based on supervisory experiences, at the same time defining the form.

**The practice/exegesis model**

The practice/exegesis model presents unique challenges as practising artists balance producing art works with writing; two distinct modes of presentation. In addition, practising artists may read broadly rather than in depth; the difference between an artists statement in an exhibition, and a sustained, critical, in-depth study constituting a thesis, can be immense. Most of the following focuses on the exegesis, as this aspect often proves to be the most problematic to visual arts researchers.

An exegesis is a written submission that supports the creative practice, which is an exhibition/performance/screening of work. It provides the reader/examiner with an insight into the study and its intellectual/theoretical location within the discipline, how it proceeded, what distinguishes the study from allied practitioners and exponents (who need to be identified) in a related field, and an understanding of the totality of the research. In short, an articulation of the journey which places your work in the context of others in the field, such as practitioners, theorists and academics, and demonstrates the unique contribution to knowledge made through your research.
The exhibition/performance/screening is the culmination of the research whilst the exegesis supports and provides an insight into the journey and processes involved. The exegesis must develop a sustained and coherent argument that illuminates upon, and supports, the artwork. Artworks, including performances, can convey ambiguity and allow interpretation. The exegesis is important as it includes documentation of the practical work from the examination, so that other scholars, researchers and interested people can learn from the candidate’s work, thereby making a contribution to the field.

The exegesis therefore should contextualise and ground the exhibition/performance/screening and should not be examined separately. It should be transparent in approach. If it is confusing or obtuse it is offering inadequate support. A good exegesis provides an accessible record for others of the practical and theoretical trajectory of the research.

Progression on a thesis should be sustained as time goes faster than one thinks. Be purposeful from the beginning. Start with some key background reading and then prepare a preliminary outline. This should be followed by more focussed reading as preparation for the exegesis. As soon as possible a first draft should be attempted, which could lead to further reading. It is critical that you don’t proceed on your research without being attentive to the preparatory work in order to avoid facing the challenge of writing.

The research develops from a question/s, which forms the basis for investigation and resolution through the production of a body of artwork with the support of the exegesis. The area of investigation must be manageable and focussed so that the topic is treated in depth. It should not be a diffuse topic, which is developed superficially.

Writing is a way of ordering and structuring your thoughts in a palpable form. Thus, writing of the exegesis should not be a last minute afterthought but an integral document that informs on and complements
the artwork, which is produced for the thesis. Documenting works in progress through photographs and a diary/journal (visual and anecdotal) are also valuable processes in informing upon the research.

A diary/journal is useful in assisting in the writing and documenting of the exegesis. It could also be used in its own right. Ensure however, that including a diary/journal and/or further supportive material is contextualised and not just loosely tacked on. Coherence is essential in both documenting and providing insight into the research approach. The reward for producing a thesis can should be that you have significantly advanced in your understanding of the topic and have grown in your critical and research skills. Whilst the qualification recognises your research and expertise as judged by your peers (qualified examiners) it also places you within a research culture. The completion of the thesis concludes one significant journey and establishes the base for further research within a university environment.

What is in the exegesis?
The exegesis should direct the candidate and examiner on how to read/approach the work. At an early stage of the exegesis it is important to make clear what main assumptions are being made in the treatment of the topic. As in a conventional thesis, don’t assume that the reader/examiner is tuned into your wavelength; clarity and clear definitions aimed at the uninitiated are crucial in outlining your research thinking and approach. Avoid using key terms in distinctive ways without indicating early in your writing what you mean. Avoid jargon and glib phrases – a problem faced by many art practitioners used to gleaning material from various sources for exhibition statements.

Whilst the exegesis will contain some descriptive material, such as, what the project is about, this must be controlled and managed. What is
submitted should be subject to analysis and have a clear relationship to the issues advanced in the thesis. In writing the exegesis some restraint in the use of direct quotations should be exercised. In most instances quotations should be reflected on and analysed, or used as effective summaries of your own discussion. It is imperative that the exegesis shows the development of your own ideas.

As the exegesis unfolds it is important to demonstrate a familiarity with the relevant established theories and current debates in the field(s) of systematic inquiry that make up the conceptual context of your thesis. In addition, informed knowledge of the field, which relates to discussion about significant practitioners, is important.

At the same time candidates should acknowledge areas related but outside the parameters that you have established their research. Be attentive to accurately representing views that may run counter to your own position. Distortion or ignoring counter arguments and positions or not identifying appropriate and related practitioners demonstrates a weakness in one’s research. Indicate clearly how you developed the project, explaining the techniques employed and their success.

Be attentive to the mechanics of writing, such as, grammar, punctuation and spelling. Despite the pervasiveness of computer programs that help in dealing with mechanical aspects don’t take anything for granted. Quietly reading aloud can sometimes assist in determining where to place a comma or full stop.

The following references are proffered as valuable resources to consult further. Some are of general application whilst others are particularly relevant to the practice/exegesis model.

References


* Particularly useful for the practice/exegesis model.