

Research Institute for Cultural Heritage

**Restlessness of meaning: an exploration of how visual
artists are working with museum collections**

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

Signature:

Date: 9/7/2004

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Abstract

Restlessness of meaning: an exploration of how visual artists are working with museum collections

This exegesis is an exploration of issues involved in making an exhibition – *The Gay Museum* (2003) – at the Western Australian Museum. Inspired by the work of artist Joseph Kosuth at the Brooklyn Museum (1990) and curator Peter Emmett at the Museum of Sydney (1994), this project attempts to explore and extend the role of artists as curators in contemporary museums. The project also shows that by re-interpreting objects in museum collections artists can actively challenge and support museums in a period of change and that collaboration between artists and museums as 'makers of meaning' can open up new possibilities for both. The curatorial vision for the exhibition therefore included strategies from contemporary museums – a multi-disciplinary approach and the use of non-linear narrative – and strategies from the contemporary art world – those that explore an aesthetic approach to objects and installation.

Research for the project was determined by the expectations, unique histories and political choices that shaped and connected three 'communities' – Jo Darbyshire from the visual arts community, the Western Australian Museum community and the gay and lesbian community of Western Australia. As *The Gay Museum* project shows, the collaboration between artists and museums can contribute to museums being sites that vibrantly reflect contemporary cultural changes.

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Photo: J. Darbyshire, 2002.

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All photo's: J. Darbyshire

Also enclosed:

Copy of *The Gay Museum* catalogue.

Chapter 1- Changes in the ways museums make meaning

If anything the stuff of human experience is its unruliness: a resistance to containment within a glass vitrine...Current art practice acknowledges this restlessness of meaning and many artists have made it the subject of their work. In doing so they have put considerable pressure on the paradigms that hold sway in most museums and public art galleries. Today's art actively challenges the definitions of art, artist, viewer, gallery, critic and even curator (Corrin 2001, p.7).

This exegesis explores how specific strategies common to both visual arts and curatorial practice are impacting on museum culture, both in Australia and internationally and how collaboration between artists and museums, is part of a wider debate, one that is interested in questioning ways of 'making meaning'. It also presents and analyses the curatorial decisions that informed my own practice in creating/curating *The Gay Museum* exhibition, especially the creative strategies used to remedy a lack of artefacts collected for a particular group – gay and lesbian people in Western Australia.

The history of the museum is bound up with the history of social and cultural change. As many 'new museologists' now argue, museums both shape and reflect the cultures that support them (Simpson 1996, p.6; Vergo 1989a). This is nowhere clearer than in the museological developments of nineteenth century Europe, modelled as they were on the establishment of the Louvre as the world's first public museum. As Tony Bennett argues in *The Birth of the Museum*, after the French Revolution museums came to be thought of as

symbols of national identity and progress, and as sites of civic education (Bennett 1995). This civic culture, however, was bound up with the development of colonialism and capitalism, both of which embedded museums within dominant discourses. This remained the case until the 1970s, when the role and functions of museums began to be widely critiqued. In the last twenty years a new field of study – New Museology – has emerged, which questions traditional museum practices in the light of social changes such as the end of colonialism, civil rights and feminist movements.

New Museology

The dominant critical perspective of New Museology is that the West's view of itself as the pinnacle of civilisation was supported by traditional classificatory and taxonomic systems. These became impossible to maintain as New Museologists challenged the idea that objects inherently reflect an objective, empirical representation of the social world. New Museologists refuted the assumption that the museum was a neutral space that did not privilege one meaning above the other. They questioned ideas about the 'construction' of 'history' and this led to a growing awareness, particularly in the area of social history, of whose history was and was not being presented? Re-interpretation of history and historical material has since been evidenced in many areas and the focus has shifted from collecting and taxonomy to interpretation – to museums as institutions of meaning and the questioning of meaning (Weiss 2000).

Interpretation of 'objects' by curators is now understood to be political in nature (Jordanova 1989; Vergo 1989b). A debate about 'ideas versus objects', which posits an opposition between 'objects' as empirical, and objects as representing 'ideas', has opened up ongoing discussion about the role and function of objects in museums (Weil 1990; Witcomb 1997). Objects themselves have been

freed from fixed classification. Artefacts and ethnographic material, for example, have been shown to move fluidly to become art objects depending on how they are interpreted and displayed (Clifford 1988). There is now a greater awareness that how an object is installed affects the way it is seen (Alpers 1991).

Art Museums

Art museums may have emerged from a shared history with museums (within their 'cabinets of curiosity') but, by the nineteenth century moved to become, quasi-sacred spaces or 'temples of a new humanist religion'. Here, Alberto Manguel says, the art museum took on the role of critic and the mere act of exhibiting something in such a museum defined its nature and became accepted as an act of faith (Manguel 1996, p. 13). The arbitrary essence of this process was questioned by artists as early as 1914 when Marcel Duchamp exhibited a bicycle wheel under the title 'Bicycle Wheel', thus making apparent that the act of labeling and the space in which the object was exhibited, ironically gave it a higher status.

Appreciation that the manner of presentation of art influenced its content became a vital part of art world discourse, particularly from the 1960s and the changing nature of art practice then influenced curatorial approaches. The emergence of the 'curator as a creative agent' enabled more challenging 'conceptual' art ideas to be presented to the public. Influential curators such as Seth Siegelaub and Harold Szeeman were primarily concerned with art as idea. For Siegelaub and the conceptual artists he worked with, information was most important and visuality or physical presence was seen as secondary. His exhibitions came to represent 'cool objectivity' and he aimed to provide what he perceived as a 'democratic' space to show each artist's work. Szeeman, on the other hand, favoured 'flux and ferment' and his shows embraced not only conceptualism but also art movements representative of the sociability of the

counter-culture – Arte Povera, Land Art, Anti form and so on. They were characterised by an assertion of physical presence, material substance and the radical individualism of the artist (Gleadowe 2000).

Artists in the Museum

Both models of contemporary exhibition activity, which recognised the importance of the exhibition both as art form and forum for critical strategy, contributed in the late 70's and 80's, to artists such as Fred Wilson, Hans Haacke, Joseph Kosuth and Mark Dion participating in a wave of exhibitions-about-exhibitions in major museums. The politics of 'making meaning' through exhibitions has emerged as one of the ongoing issues for both contemporary art and natural and social history museums (Macdonald 1998, pp. I-xiii) and despite some criticism, alternative exhibition strategies, incorporating new ideas about 'making meaning' and interpretation have been influential in the last two decades (Marcus 1996, pp. 4-8; Serota 1996; Trotter 1996, pp. 115-140). One of the more interesting ways this has occurred has been through the collaboration between curators and contemporary visual artists (Dysart 1999, p. 7).

Collaborations in this curatorial field have manifested themselves in various forms. The recent *Give and Take* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2001) is an example of a museum curator choosing particular artists to provide visual artworks that have some relationship to specific parts of the collection, in an attempt to stimulate alternative interpretations of the collection (Corrin 2001, pp. 6-12). A more adventurous example is where an artist is invited to re-interpret a collection – an example being the Louvre Museum inviting filmmaker Peter Greenaway to choose a theme and make an exhibition there (Manguel 1996, p. 13).

More significant collaboration begins when artists are invited to participate in the very building of a museum and its exhibitions. At the forefront of this movement in Australia has been the Museum of Sydney under the leadership of Peter Emmett. His insistence on the major roles played by artists in designing exhibitions for the Museum of Sydney has opened up discussion about what it is that visual artists can bring to museum culture (Conomos 1995, pp. 18-19; Emmett 1996, pp.108-120). This dissertation and its accompanying exhibition are intended as a contribution to that discussion.

Taking inspiration from artist/curators such as Joseph Kosuth at the Brooklyn Museum (The Brooklyn Museum 1992) and Brook Andrews at the Australian Museum's *Djumu* Gallery (Kirkman 1999, pp. 1-19), both of whom have provided examples of collaboration which enhance and extend our expectations of museum exhibitions, I have developed my own exhibition – *The Gay Museum*. The exhibition and exegesis which accompanies it are both an attempt to explore and apply various strategies used by artists/curators to enhance the practices of interpretation as well as use such practices to make an exhibition about a topic unrepresented in the museum collection – the history of lesbian and gay presence in Western Australia.

Strategies used to challenge traditional curatorial culture

A survey of recent collaborations between artists and museums indicates that there are three main strategies being used by visual artists and curators to challenge traditional curatorial culture. These are: A multi or cross-disciplinary approach, the use of non-linear narratives and aesthetic approaches.

The primary aim of a multi or cross-disciplinary approach is to achieve inclusivity and diversity. As a strategy, it requires a breaking down of the traditional disciplinary approach to objects whereby boundaries between natural

history, social history and anthropology are strictly maintained. When such boundaries are dissolved, it is possible to open up plural identities or readings of material that would normally be limited by traditional classification paradigms – paradigms that classify the object both as a particular object and as a museum object (Clifford 1985, pp. 236-246; Haacke 2001, pp. 47-53; Kirkman 1999, pp.1-4; Trinca & Gaynor 2002, pp.1-19).

Historically many museum exhibitions were based on the idea of linear timelines.¹ Art galleries too, traditionally focused on linear 'periods'. However, an empirical view of the world, and the way it has represented concepts of time, has increasingly been criticised, and with it, the ways it was promoted (Jordanova 1989, p. 22-40). Other models for representing 'time' have been debated in recent decades and adopted by museums. One could argue that an ahistorical view has almost become a dominant paradigm in our leading galleries.² These other models or non-linear narrative strategies encourage

¹ This methodology has been particularly upheld by scientific institutions and sociological museums such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, who have traditionally linked the idea of progress to that of Anglo civilisation.

² This is supported by Nicholas Serota, in his recent lecture, 'Experience or Interpretation, the Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art', (2000) who spoke about the varied way three famous museums with comprehensive collections of modern art, have decided to present their collections. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York aims to break the stranglehold of the linear approach favoured in the '70s and '80s and has decided to display the collection through a series of 'dossier' presentations grouped together in three major exhibitions broadly covering the periods 1880-1920, 1920-60 and 1960-2000. In Paris, at the Musee National d'Art Moderne at the Pompidou Centre, an arrangement by movement and artist is planned, which will highlight a particularly European viewpoint. Finally, Serota, as Director of the new Tate Modern in London, has chosen to adopt four broad thematic groupings for his collection, each covering the whole century and juxtaposing contemporary and historical works, so that the visitor is reminded 'that we view the past through the frame of the present.' Nicholas Serota, Experience or Interpretation, the Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art, (2000), Thames & Hudson, London, pp.1-63.

connective readings of and between objects and text, across time, and hope to link history to contemporary experience through personal identification (Griffiths 2000, pp. 21-38). Examples may include exhibitions based on thematic or typological premises or the use of first person text to include personal voices and experience (Harvey 1994, pp. 24-27; Kent 1997, pp. 18-19; Williamson 1995; Witcomb 1994, pp. 239-262).

By consciously focusing on and exploring the aesthetic and material qualities of objects, this strategy aims to evoke a response or 'bodily identification' in the audience. This approach, promoting 'experience over interpretation', suggests identification or 'feeling' as a valid way to understand experience or to contextualize ideas (Clark 1996, pp. 165-177; Harpley & Wilson 1994; Landman 1994; Nimmo 1995, p.17). This emphasis on aesthetic awareness is part of the realisation of the importance of the exhibition as an installation. Exhibitions that privilege aesthetic strategies often employ juxtaposition to encourage self-reflexive readings and to exploit possibilities for irony and humour (Alpers 1991, p. 31; Kotik 1992, pp. xii; Stephen 1999, pp. 104-108). They may also employ disjunction, create surprise or 'break the rules' to question assumptions and add vitality to exhibitions (Kwon, Corrin & Bryson 1997; Manguel 1996, p.13; Beardsley 1984; Crossley 1989, p. 117-120). The use of text as a visual medium, and not just a didactic vehicle, can also be explored (Kotik 1992, p. xiv).

Although it seems that cross-disciplinary strategies and non-linear approaches have developed primarily through social history and anthropology museums and the last strategy – aesthetic qualities – has come from developments in the visual arts field, there have been interesting overlaps. These overlaps occur around the concerns of Conceptual artists (Green 1999, pp. 178-95) and advocates of Material Culture (Lubar & Kingery 1993). The practical application

of these strategies in exhibition making in museums exemplifies the richness of these collaborations.

One of the contexts for this activity is the need to respond to criticisms about lack of access and representation of minority groups and communities. Greater effort is now being given to include diverse 'other' voices and views. These include women's history (Anderson 1991, pp. 130-141; Clark 1994, pp. 4-6), Indigenous groups who want greater control in how they are being represented, especially by anthropology departments (Croft 2000, pp. 8-14; Eldridge 1996, pp. 1-20), ethnic groups who acknowledge conflicting identities (Marshall 1999, pp. 21-24; Szekeres 1994, pp. 2-5) and sub-culture groups (Bennett 1996, pp. 1-13; Simpson 1996). Science museums have also expressed a growing conviction that 'science' needs to be embedded in 'other kinds' of stories (Macdonald 1998, pp. i-xiii).

The Gay Museum at The West Australian Museum

Like the Australian Museum in Sydney the Western Australian Museum had a particular colonial history that emphasised its collections of scientific and anthropology/ ethnographic materials (Delroy 1991-1992, pp. 79-98; Rigg 1994, pp. 188-203). In the 1970s however, it became the first Australian state museum to deal with social history (Anderson 1991, pp. 130-141) and more recently, it has been pro-active in encouraging contemporary Aboriginal culture exhibitions³ and environmental history (Trinca 2000, p. 4-5).

³ A major permanent exhibition *Katta Djinoong - First Peoples of Western Australia* (1999), has been attributed to Margaret Anderson, who instigated the changes that led to a new interpretation of the aboriginal gallery, including the formation of an active aboriginal advisory board for the museum. The previous exhibition had been designed in 1975. See M.E. Lofgrens catalogue *Patterns Of Life* (1975), a Western Australian Museum publication. Conversation between Jo Darbyshire and Moya Smith, current director, Anthropology, WA Museum, 8.3.2001.

My project at the WA Museum expands on the Museum's commitment to social history exhibitions and follows calls to provide access for diverse voices, and to accent plural identities, whilst describing the history of Australian culture (Trotter 1996, pp. 115-140). The theme of the exhibition *The Gay Museum* is an exploration of the social history of gay and lesbian presence and identity in Western Australia, leading up to, and addressing the current historic legislation proposed for lesbian and gay reform in WA. This omnibus legislation ends all legal discrimination against gay and lesbian people, making it the most radical law reform in Australia (Report of the Ministerial Committee 2001, pp. 1-134).

The WA Museum has not had a significant involvement in representing or collecting for this community and this is an under-researched area with a paucity of historical records relating to Western Australia. There are a small number of articles and dissertations available. See especially (Bavin-Mizzi 1993; Baskerville 1998; Cover 1997, pp. 110-116; Day 1993, pp. 10-11; Douglas 1986, pp. 4-5; Meyer 2002, pp.1-9), a handful of current research projects still in the process of being written up and a collection of ephemera in the Gay and Lesbian Archives of WA waiting to be accessioned. The situation is only marginally better in the other states of Australia and there have been calls for more work to be done by historians and curators to redress this imbalance (Dolan 1999, p.8; Wotherspoon 1992, pp. 148-159).

Creative strategies

The Gay Museum, through the use of 'artistic intervention', and in collaboration with the WA Museum, explored some of New Museology's concerns with access, collection practices and interpretation in the museum. As with other

Smaller temporary art exhibitions have been held in 2001 and 2002 (Curated by Anna Edmundson).

exhibitions that attempted to represent the 'uncollected' and to signify 'absence' there was a need for creative interpretative strategies (Harpley & Wilson 1994, p. 9). As few objects were collected to illustrate homosexuality or to acknowledge this cultural group, I appropriated objects from the main collections and freeing them from their original classificatory context, allowed them to operate as symbols to provide new meanings.

Making Meaning

The exhibition was primarily about making meaning. It supported the current museological debate that meaning is fluidly constructed by the curator and is not fixed. This approach aimed to be provocative but also to encourage self-reflexivity for viewers, as it made apparent constructed meanings and challenged the notion that there is one fixed meaning.

Visually the exhibition was based on a Kosuthian style⁴ in which, acting as an artist-curator, I used objects from social history, anthropology and natural history and 'played' in the sense Kosuth did – allowing alternative meanings to those originally proscribed by museum classification – to exist. A strategy of re-contextualising and juxtaposing objects with text, as well as with objects collected from outside the museum, provided the main installation techniques used to achieve this. Text also became a visual 'object'. The result was both a visual art installation and a history exhibition.

The Processes used to make the exhibition

The processes I chose to use in the creation of *The Gay Museum* were based on the processes used in the making of the Museum of Sydney. Firstly, I undertook to collect empirical research relating to historical information on gay

⁴ I give a detailed description of Kosuth's ideas and methods in next chapter – a case study about Kosuth.

and lesbian people in WA, conducted oral history interviews, and 'looked' through the collections of the museum wherever possible, to find objects which could be used to 'make meaning'. Secondly, I amalgamated information from various sources: texts, visual imagery and objects in the collections, in a kind of 'scrap-book', allowing 'play', serendipity and consideration of alternative readings to operate freely. Finally, I made choices in regard to juxtaposition of information and material, in an attempt to make vibrant connections between objects and texts and which stimulated imaginative, symbolic and emotional readings.

These three processes were greatly affected, of course, by my relationship with the two communities I was working with. The first was with the museum community and its protocols: the restrictions placed on my work by conservation, security, ethical concerns and the entrenched museum culture which operated at the WA Museum. I was also greatly influenced by the diverse gay and lesbian community in Western Australia and the forces that had shaped and affected the history of this community generally. My connection to the visual arts also added the idea of a third community to the project. I brought my own expectations and experiences to the project and was aware that the preconceived idea of what an artist did or didn't do underlined concerns in the other two communities.

This exegesis attempts to describe and reflect on the processes I engaged with during the course of creating/curating *The Gay Museum*. To do so, I provide case studies of similar projects elsewhere, as well as a discussion of the immediate context in which I had to operate. These serve to inform both my approach to curating the exhibition and my attempt to understand what took place. As the reader will come to realise, there were three main forces I had to manage – community expectations, my own imaginative desires for the

exhibition and the reality of what I had to work with. Ultimately this struggle shaped the exhibition.

Chapter 2 – Case studies – Joseph Kosuth and the Museum of Sydney

In this chapter I will examine two projects that have contributed to the debate around artists working in museums. They are an international exhibition curated by Joseph Kosuth and the Museum of Sydney, an innovative Australian museum where Senior Curator Peter Emmett, worked collaboratively with a group of artists to open up ideas about the way artefacts could be displayed and meanings made in contemporary museums.

I will analyse specific strategies that operated in these exhibitions. These were: multi or cross-disciplinary collaboration, non-linear narratives and an aesthetic awareness of the importance of the exhibition as an installation, explored through the use of juxtaposition and text as a visual medium.

Joseph Kosuth

In 1990, conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth produced an exhibition as part of The Brooklyn Museum's Grand Lobby Projects.⁵ Kosuth proposed working against the right wing political ideas he saw endangering society's freedoms at the time, especially attacks based on censorship.⁶ In an exhibition called *The Play of the*

⁵ These installation projects, enabling painters, sculptors and Installation artists to explore their ideas on a grand scale, began in 1984 and renewed interest in environmental and site-specific works.

⁶ These were primarily the attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal organisation that had funded the arts for the previous twenty years and which suddenly came under attack from right-wing politicians wanting to cancel funding to artists exploring ideas of sex, especially gay and lesbian artists. This resulted in the cancellation of funding to Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, John Fleck and Tim Miller and the cancellation of the photographic

Unmentionable he worked with artworks and objects from the museums collections that were all, at one time or another, considered 'controversial'. Using strategies of juxtaposition and re-contextualisation, he installed them to make obvious the idea that 'Just as the relationships within society constantly evolve, so does our comprehension and judgment of artworks and cultural artefacts' (Kotik 1992, p. xii).

Using the collections as a kind of 'ready-made' Kosuth created an installation in the Brooklyn Museum (Crimp 1995).⁷ His project was based on the idea that:

An artist's activity consists not simply in fashioning objects but in making meaning; so that while this exhibition served to address an issue of current concern, he saw the installation itself as a legitimate part of his activity as an artist (Kotik 1992, p. xii).

The exhibition presented more than a hundred works - ranging from an Egyptian stone relief of 1300 B.C., nineteenth century bronze statues by Auguste Rodin to contemporary work by Barbara Kruger. Enlarged texts or quotes - some contemporary, some theoretical, some propaganda - framed and reframed the works, both commenting on and being commented on by them. What was demonstrated was how the perception of cultural artifacts changed according to time and place. Seen as both accessible and provocative *The*

exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. See Sarah Schulman's article, 'Is the NEA Good for Gay Art?', *Outweek*, August 8, 1990, p. 54.

⁷ The 'ready-made' is a strategy introduced by Marcel Duchamp in the 1920s, whereby any object, labelled 'art' becomes an artwork. As Donald Crimp (1995, p. 1) says: It 'embodied a proposition that the artist invents nothing, that he or she only uses, manipulates, displaces, reformulates, repositions what history has provided. This is not to divest the artist of the power to intervene in, to alter or expand, discourse, only to dispense with the fiction that the power arises from an autonomous self existing outside history and ideology. The readymades(sic) propose that the artist cannot make, but can only take what is already there.'

Play of the Unmentionable was considered very successful with over ninety-one thousand people visiting the Museum during its three-month installation.

Questioning the museum

According to the curator of contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum, Charlotta Kotik, all departments of the Museum were involved in Kosuth's exhibition although not everyone was comfortable about him using the collections of the old and 'encyclopedic' museum.

There was a shared concern that the intrusion of the artist-turned-curator could harm the traditional perception of the objects by taking them out of context... For the individual curators, opening the field to an outsider who might harm the integrity of the collections as well as the individual objects was a difficult decision to make and quite contrary to any established museum practice (Kotik 1992, p. xii).

Kotik admitted that the restrictions inherent in the highly specialised training of various disciplines in museum practice often resulted in rules that were hard to change. Not only were Kosuth's methods different for the museum community, but they also questioned accepted notions of procedure, and made apparent how these accepted 'rules' affected the interpretation of objects.

Kosuth and his assistant Max Moerman worked closely with curators on selecting objects/artworks that were essentially grouped around themes. This strategy enabled him to work with curators on their area of expertise. He then took these selections and used them in accordance with his own vision.⁸ As

⁸ Kotik (1992, p. xv) points out that as Kosuth chose lesser known or infrequently shown pieces alongside those considered most valued, it provided 'all involved with a new look at the collection, revealing special characteristics of individual works.'

Kotik(1992, p. xii) commented, Kosuth's very presence seemed to raise questions of who had the right to 'interpret' museum collections and it seemed the interpretation of the object became the most ideologically charged of all museum mandates.

Walter Benjamin pointed out that the 'aura' of a work of art was tied to notions of authenticity and uniqueness (Benjamin 1968, pp. 219-253). Kosuth, who was influenced by Benjamin, invited his viewers to actively think about, not only the message of the art, but the purposes and nature of the institution that contained it. He felt that while 'aura' was provided by ritual context in the religious age, in the mechanical age 'aura' was based on 'politics' - the context of being placed in a museum or institution or in the market (Freedberg 1992, pp. 45-46).⁹

This questioning of the institution and the process of making meaning was highly political, as historically, the museum itself has been used to instil in audiences a blind acceptance of authority, rules and fetishisation (Bennett 1990, pp. 35-55). For the museum, being asked to follow a more self-reflective path and to question its way of doing things, must have been quite confronting.

Strategies for making meaning

Kosuth's main aim was to make the viewer self-reflexive and responsible for his or her own interpretation of an exhibition (Kosuth 1999)¹⁰. He did not provide a

⁹ Freedberg says: 'Kosuth recognised that painting had become the product of hegemonic institutions and so gave it up. A truly political art ... would not content itself with the message alone; it had to engage the viewer in a questioning of the nature and process of art itself.'

¹⁰ This aim is something Kosuth (1999, p. 199) considers artists have a responsibility to enact and it informs his belief that the teaching of art is an important part of the production of art. 'If the social responsibility of cultural reflection (the why) is not taught along with a knowledge of the history of how artists have made meaning, then we are doomed to be oppressed by our

master narrative or didactic panels. Rather, he wanted his installation to engender both reflection and provocation in the audience - to make each viewer aware of their own judgment. To do this he used a **multi-disciplinary approach** - putting artifacts from the separate disciplines of art history, archaeology, and ethnography, together. This non-hierarchical approach seems common now, but at the time was ground-breaking.¹¹

He also played with the **aesthetic** potential of artefacts and text, using juxtaposition of both to make the viewer aware of the process whereby meaning is constructed. As Freedberg says:

The viewer begins to see the work of art in the way the artist does, 'as a struggle to make and cancel meaning and reform it.' Understanding the work of art becomes an event that locates and includes the viewer...called forth by the juxtaposition of objects and texts (Freedberg 1992, p. 45).

Kosuth also used a strategy of juxtaposition to provide a **non-linear narrative**. By ignoring a traditional linear time-line he hoped to draw attention to vibrant connections between past and contemporary concerns, which were ahistorical in nature. For instance he juxtaposed *Torso of Dionysos* (a fourth century sculpture of a naked male body with its head, arms and lower legs missing),

traditions rather than informed by them. The first lesson, taught by example, is that what is to be learned is a process of thinking and not a dogma in craft or theory.'

¹¹ Although Kosuth intended his installation to be 'neutral', his cool and elegant style, with its junctures of words, light and images, gained its own historical momentum and status and became known as the Kosuthian style. Ironically, it has become eminently marketable. Recent evidence of this use of text could be seen in the Modern Australian Women- paintings and prints 1925-1945, a major touring exhibition which visited Western Australia, and other states in 2001. It was curated by Jane Hylton, former Curator of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

with *Male Nude* (1982) by Robert Mapplethorpe (a contemporary photograph that showed a male body with head and lower legs missing). The audience could not miss the similarities between the two works despite the huge distance in time separating their production and different mediums.

The label for the *Torso of Dionysos* also explained that the classical nude torso was regarded as the cultural ideal of a sound mind in a sound body. In this case, the image of Dionysos allowed the Greeks to make the statement that 'ones abrogation of reason as the result of an outside stimulus, wine in this case, allows passion to rule.' At the time of the exhibition Robert Mapplethorpe's images were being debated in the popular media and censored in some galleries and museums. Kosuth asked the audience therefore, not only to link past ideas about 'the sound body' to topical concerns with male sexuality and AIDS, but also to ask more generally – Who makes the decision that one of these is art, and the other is not? Who censors our images, at this time in history, and why?

Exhibition as an installation

I have already mentioned that changes in avant-garde art that took place in America in 1969 gave rise to 'the curator as creator'. One of these influential curators, Seth Siegelau, included Joseph Kosuth in his exhibition 'The January Show' (Gleadowe 2000, p. 104).¹² Kosuth must have been influenced by Siegelau's awareness of himself as curator or 'exhibition organiser'¹³ and, as Tereasa Gleadowe has pointed out 'The reflexivity which is a primary

¹² Gleadowe explains that Kosuth showed sets of the magazine and newspaper pages in which he had published thesaurus definitions of the terms 'existence' and 'time'.

¹³ Gleadowe (2000, p. 107) points out that Siegelau identified the dangers of the 'star' curator, that an identifiable 'house style' would become inevitable and that the successful exhibition organiser would become harmful for the artist 'because his opinions begin to become more important than what his opinions are about'. He thus retired from exhibition organizing in 1971.

characteristic of early Conceptual art appeared to have been extended to thinking about the nature of exhibition making...' (2000, p. 106).

It was from this time that the idea of the exhibition as an art form in itself became manifest in Kosuth's work. He consciously set out to critique the museum and to assume the visitor would be an active participant in constructing meaning.¹⁴ He encouraged a transparency in the process of production and did not privilege one particular form of text, or discipline over another. Kosuth worked as a creative agent but presented the exhibition as a text to be read and interpreted by the viewer. Above all he saw the exhibition as a process about making meaning, not a product. *The Play of the Unmentionable* at the Brooklyn Museum could be seen as the resolution to decades of thinking about exhibition making.

¹⁴ Gleadowe (2000, p. 111) gives examples of other artists, after Kosuth's exhibition in 1990, who made the relationship between the museum and its audience the main subject of their work. Ibid.

Museum of Sydney

The Museum of Sydney (MoS), on the site of first Government House, Sydney, is a contemporary museum¹⁵ that, I believe, has been a crucial role model and benchmark for new museums being built in Australia. This largely happened through the vision of one man – Director Peter Emmett – and the creative strategies he chose to work with in the formation of a new kind of museum.

A multi-disciplinary approach was paramount in all aspects of making the museum from the relationship with the architects (Nimmo 1995, p.17)¹⁶ through to the design of the exhibitions generally. Strategies from the contemporary arts were used extensively and a traditional linear narrative jettisoned.

The reasons for these approaches are 'based on the idea that history is a conversation across time and place' and that the people involved in making the building and its exhibitions believe there is no 'one story' of Sydney (Darbyshire 2002a). There is a multi-disciplined interpretation involving various ways of making stories: they employ both traditional ways (utilising showcases, drawers and text) and new ways (involving video screens, glass panels, sound and installation). These methods of interpretation support Emmett's philosophy—encapsulated in the text of the explanatory panels at the entrance to the Museum of Sydney: that 'a museum is everything that is not a book. It is a spatial and sensory experience, about the relationship between things' (Museum of Sydney 1995).

¹⁵ One of the properties run by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW.

¹⁶ Nimmo talks about the relationship between the artists and architects as being particularly successful and makes the point that the artists and architects were jointly awarded the Lloyd Rees Award for Civic Design by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 1995.

It is no surprise that with its radical redefinition of a museum experience the MoS has elicited mixed reactions and emotional responses including being called: 'a temple of high design', 'a poetic evocation of the sense of place', 'a museum of fragments', 'a post-modern collage', and 'a mess, an inspiration, too empty, too full, weird, wonderful, trendy, tawdry, confused, courageous' (Walden 2002).

The MoS has challenged the paradigm of museum culture, especially in the area of interpretation and it is interesting to see many new, contemporary museums now trying to elicit a more spatial and sensory experience.¹⁷

The Collaborative Process

The dynamic energy of MoS was directly associated with the working process used by Peter Emmett and his resolution that the MoS be a collaboration between many talented people, including artists. He had a strong history in engaging artists to work on other projects (Dysart 1999, p. 7)¹⁸ and likened being the Director of MoS to being a combination of artistic director and project manager. Importantly, managerial control of the budget, personnel and program allowed him overall creative direction so his vision could be carried through without interference. Although Emmett's project was based on 'very serious speculative scholarship' this managerial independence enabled him to be innovative, brave and to take creative risks (Darbyshire 2002a).

¹⁷ Such as the Tate Modern, in London (2000) and the National Museum in Canberra (2001).

¹⁸ See examples in Dinah Dysart's article (1999, p. 7): 'Supporters of the Historic Houses Trust can hardly have failed to notice just how much contemporary art has enlivened Trust properties over the last decade. Examples of contemporary sculpture, installation, dance, music, video, photography, performance and soundscape...have gradually found their way into the houses, the gardens and the courtyards...'

Empirical Research

For the first stage of the process, Emmett worked with an interdisciplinary team of researchers - social historians, art historians, archaeologists and archivists, who collected extensively from primary research material to form the Research Library. 'Things came rolling in with multi-disciplinary abandon!' reveals Emmett (Emmett 1996, p. 113)¹⁹

Interpretation

For the second stage, Emmett hired 20 people who were committed to the process for twelve months and who had in common a creative and poetic approach to the world. He claims interpretation is about being able to delve into very subjective areas and he encouraged 'play', which he defined as work in the imaginary and poetic realm and used people who could 'imagine, fantasize and link' (Darbyshire 2002a)²⁰. He saw his job as both to encourage the artists to be incredibly creative – 'not locking down their process' – and to work with them to achieve a final product.

The physical manifestation of the process for the second stage was called 'the scrapbook'. Over three months a real collaboration took place as team members met around the same big table. As they looked through research folders they exchanged thoughts about the things they were discovering and connections between them. A pertinent quote, for instance, was entered on a

¹⁹ They amassed an enormous amount of empirical research; files of documents, newspaper reports, photographs, lists of objects in museums and the archaeological sites relevant to the project, and lists of other subject data such as the botanical names of pollen found on the site.

²⁰ He supported the artists to do so by backing them up with people who could 'order' and who could make sure all the references were found and recorded properly. Emmett also recognised that artists 'had the ability to 'go into spooky places' and were interested in the 'archaeology of memory' inherent in sites.

page and gradually, by accident, serendipity and design other quotes, images and objects were linked to it.

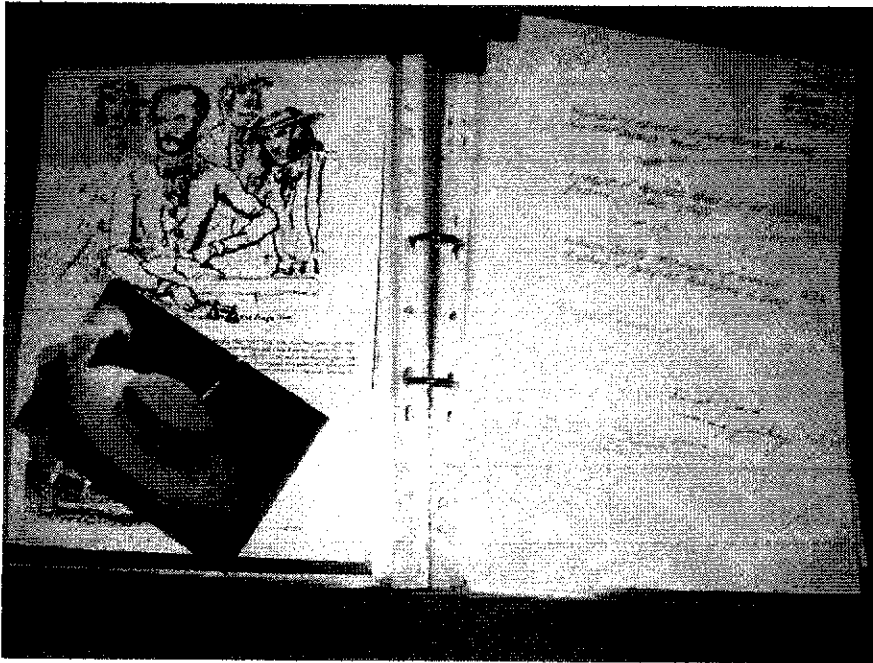


Image 1 – Sample of collected material in the Scrapbook, Resource Library, Museum of Sydney.

Photo: J Darbyshire.

Making

In the third part of the process all the details from the Scrapbook were entered into a database, and from this came the making of the final texts for the exhibition. Emmett and the creative team defined and chose the objects/texts and images and physically installed their exhibits. The 'making' of the exhibition was crucial to the feel of the museum and Emmett said he was keen to work with artists, not just for their ideas, but also for their skills as 'artisans'. He was interested in the artists as 'makers' not as 'designers'.²¹ Emmett was committed to the collaborative nature of the creation of MoS. What was important was the

²¹ This came from a long-held interest in Craft and the work of socialist artisan William Morris, the subject of his PhD. A designer was used for certain jobs - designing furniture etc.

celebration of a diversity of views rather than the ideas of one expert. He particularly loved the idea of conversations that happen across time (Darbyshire 2002a).

Metaphors - the contested site

The physical site, in Sydney's CBD, was a 'contested site' from the beginning. Archaeologists, developers, Friends of the First Government House Site, the NSW Land Council, Architects Denton Corker Marshall and the Historic Houses Trust all had special interests in the site. Emmett understood that it was 'a charged site emotionally because it was a symbol of contested histories' (Emmett 1993, p. 2)

The mission of the museum became then 'the poetic evocation of the metaphor of place' (Emmett 1996, p. 112).²² Emmett's framework for MoS was based on a controversial 'spatial history' of Sydney which had been influenced by the work of Paul Carter who popularized the term 'spatial history':

Spatial history does not order its subject matter into a nationalist enterprise...but suggests the plurality of directions across space and time by the dialogue of many criss-crossing voices, past and present (Emmett 1993, p. 3).

He changed the main metaphor of the site from that of a 'site of origin' to being 'a site of contact' (Darbyshire 2002a). He was interested in the 'state of uncertainty' engendered by the idea of approximately 1000 people on the first fleet ships making contact with approximately 1000 *Eora* people within the trees

²² These were to do with 'Notions of origins, nostalgia, inheritance...it's a sense of longing, for belonging to place... This was the fascinating paradox: its physical remains conjure imaginings of an absent house that evokes divergent emotional responses...it's a powerful and potentially profound metaphor.'

on land. One of the actions he took in this regard was to refuse the architects plans for a giant statue of Governor Phillip and a corresponding row of flagpoles... and to instead commission the installation *Edge of the Trees*.

The Edge of the Trees

Edge of the Trees (1995), was a collaboration between indigenous artist Fiona Foley and non-indigenous artist Janet Laurence. Twenty-nine poles and limestone pillars that make up the installation correspond to the twenty-nine Aboriginal clans that once inhabited the Sydney area. Aesthetic responses are evoked by the use of organic materials, captured behind glass in some of the pillars, and by the materials of the pillars themselves. Wooden poles remind viewers of the trees which once stood on the site. Rusting steel pillars reference not only the symbolic, technological achievements of European culture, but also the red ochre used by Aboriginal people for painting and decoration. All the materials used talk about nature and culture.²³

This quiet sculpture invokes both an intimate, personal identification and yet is powerful and challenging. This is because 'It proposes not a simple dichotomy, but a complex merging of culture, which stands as a metaphor for a shared Australian experience.' (Nimmo 1995, p. 17)

No Master Narrative

The MoS challenged the traditional view that a museum provides a 'master narrative'. Instead, it experimented with a new style of site interpretation - adopting a deliberate curatorial tactic of ambiguity. MoS declared there was 'no one story of Sydney' (Museum of Sydney 1995) and also went on to present

²³ A multi-disciplinary approach is also apparent in the juxtaposition of botanical names in Latin and Aboriginal language words that are carved and burnt into the poles. As you walk among the poles you hear sounds - language of the Eora people.

archival sources and fictional representations as having equal status in the exhibitions.

This provoked controversy and some, like Guy Hansen, Curator of Political History at the National Museum of Australia, worried that the visitor would be confused at the lack of didactic panels and that there seemed to be no attempt to create a 'factual account' (Hansen 1996, p. 18).²⁴ One of his main concerns was whether the displays would be understood as artworks or as historical displays. Interpretation that utilizes conceptual strategies from the art world may often be accused of not being a 'serious' enough endeavour. This can be seen in Hansen's accusation:

I would argue that, taken overall, the Museum's displays serve to depoliticise our history... a triumph of aesthetics over content. The material remnants of the past are not being interpreted, but rather being used as props in a larger artwork (1996, p.19).

Grace Karskens, an archaeologist, also criticized MoS for the way narratives and evaluations were deliberately erased or avoided (Karskens 2000, p.55).²⁵ Karskens felt that Emmett had reverted to a 'cabinet of curiosities' effect where objects were presented as mere 'flotsam and jetsam' from the past. In her opinion this approach – a refusal to narrate or to inform – did nothing to critique and subvert the oppressive narratives about race, class, empire, nation, power and science that the museum sought to affect. While admitting the archaeological displays were beautifully designed, Karskens called for a more

²⁴ 'While the displays are magnificent, they provide very little information... I suspect that visitors, conditioned by their visits to other museums, view the displays as authoritative accounts rather than fictional or artistic responses to the past.'

²⁵ 'The separation of material from words, collecting from interpretation, reached its apotheosis, and intentionally so... the deficiency in interpretation was transformed into a kind of virtue.'

balanced awareness that 'sensuality and materiality' must partner 'rational analysis and synthesis.' (2000, p. 57)

Emmett denies his approach to interpretation is a denial of scholarship and consultation (Emmett 1996, p. 120). He believes that to revise the self-congratulatory assumptions about heritage and nationalism we should also be revising the self-congratulatory claims about our museums and collections (Emmett 1993, p. 3). He warns that in looking beyond the inherited taxonomies of museums to new social classifications poses the danger of creating new orders and hierarchies that are as selective and authoritarian as the old and he would rather ask: 'how would (people), not museologists, like to renegotiate and re-order things to be more valid?' (1993, p. 6)

Emmett understands that this direction frightens museologists and academics because it not only questions the authority of the museum to represent cultural experience, but enters intangible areas: worlds of emotion and value that cannot be ordered or classified. He argues however, that an alternative approach need not mean chaos. He cites, for example, Paul Carter's term 'post-colonial collage' as an alternative useful way of thinking about the methodology. (1993, p. 5)

Julie Marcus acknowledges that the post-modern interpretive strategies used by the curators of MoS are intended to subvert power in order to reveal. However, she says the 'Bouvard and Pecuchet principle' (Marcus 1996, p. 5)²⁶ – the making of meaning through presenting collages of quotations and the presentation of collections, without distinctions or evaluation – is problematic.

²⁶ Referring to Flaubert's nineteenth century novel of the same name, which tells the tale of two retired clerks who attempt to construct a museum, and a book which would contain all knowledge. Their lack of ability to discriminate, or order knowledge, ultimately meant the book was never written.

The use of collage and multiple voices falsely promoted the idea that because 'truth is ever fragmentary, evaluation and narrative are impossible...' (1996, p. 6). Marcus refutes the idea that truth lies in the gathering together and presentation of its multiple fragments and that it is enough for people to make what they will of them. It is her belief that marginalised sectors of the community – Aboriginal people, lesbians and gays and others, cannot recognise or discover themselves or their experience within the fragmented displays. (1996, p. 6)

I disagree with this assertion. Firstly, I found there was greater freedom for me to move imaginatively within the collaged stories in MoS. Perhaps this is because I am an artist (one of the 'elite' in the common terminology of right wing politicians at this moment in time) who has the 'luxury of imagination'. However, I am also in one of the minority groups Marcus feels would be isolated by the interpretation strategy. She seems to have forgotten that the chances of me discovering any reference to a lesbian history or experience in the master narratives of more mainstream museums has been, and continues to be, highly unlikely. The fact that more sensory experiences were evoked in the Museum of Sydney actually allowed me entry into the stories as a sexual body, but without being assumed to be a heterosexual body.

Wonder and Imagination – *The Collectors Chests*

Emmett, believing that Museums should be places of curiosity, pleasure and play, was very interested in the idea of the 'arcane' - the obscure, weird things that shock²⁷ and this led to many of the ideas behind the *Collectors Chest* drawers. He aimed to 'go beyond methodology and taxonomy and put back together 'things that have survived' and to make the audience imagine or wonder about the people they belonged too (Darbyshire 2002a).

²⁷ For example brutal occurrences such as convicts being nailed by their ears.

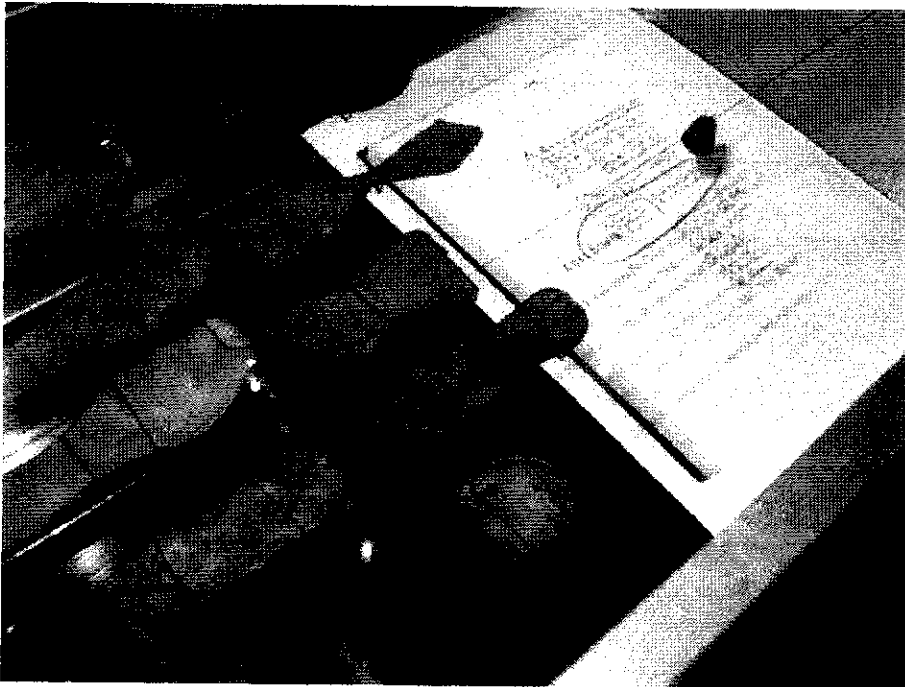


Image 2 – ‘Lost Souls’ drawer, Museum of Sydney *Collectors Chests* (1994-95), (detail), children’s leather shoe souls excavated from a sealed well on Bunkers Hill, The Rocks, with overlaid text: ‘Detail from the facsimile of Lieutenant William Bradley’s journal 1786-92 including a voyage to New South Wales in HMS *Sirius*, which records the names of drowned passengers, and the return in the *Waakzaamheydt* transport.’

Photo: J Darbyshire.

Artist/curator Narelle Jubelin called her *Collectors Chests* (1994-95) modern versions of the *Wanderkammer*, or ‘cabinets of curiosity’.²⁸ When the quest for sensations of wonder and the exotic were fostered by voyages of scientific discovery, these cabinets of curiosity, she explains, were the nurseries of modern science and museums. Conceptually, the *Collector Chests* explored and questioned ideas about colonialism and reminded us that:

The rage for ‘curios’ under the guise of museum collection, natural science and ethnography, often masked arcane ‘theories’ about the

²⁸ These were idiosyncratic collections of rare and curious objects and natural wonders amassed by the aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie in the 17th and 18th centuries.

origins of the world and human differences' but they also celebrated the idea of wonder – that 'nothing is too wonderful to be true (Jubelin 1995).

For Karskens, the imaginative and 'eye-catching' display of free-floating artefacts, without supporting documentation and an interpretative framework, does not constitute meaningful research and does not offer a greater understanding of our past (Karskens 2000, p. 51). Another senior curator, Ann Stephen, of Social History at the Powerhouse Museum, reminds us however, that curiosities were also displayed to please the eye, rather than organised according to any classification system or taxonomic order (Stephen 1999, p. 104). Like earlier collectors, says Stephen, Jubelin is an amateur, and her ordering is counter-professional. The linking of unlike things is intuitive and visual. She points out that the austerity and isolation of Jubelin's installation is in contrast to the stuffed drawers of earlier collectors and that the fragment and the reproduction may be the most appropriate metaphors for post-colonial cultures. (1999, pp. 107-108)

Jubelin's strategy of juxtaposition follows the desire in contemporary visual arts for 'form' to manifest 'idea'. The two must be connected– to 'work' successfully. Exploring the potential of materials to make meaning is what many artists like to pursue. It is interesting that the success of this strategy seems to be the effect on it by the context in which it is placed. For instance, in an art institution, a project may be expected to be 'adventurous' with taxonomy, but when displayed in a history museum, the same installation may be expected to 'explain itself' and to be 'orderly' in the way it imparts knowledge (Ward 2002).²⁹

²⁹ An example of this can be seen in Fiona Hall's large witty 'Cell Culture Installation' in the recent exhibition *conVerge: Where Art and Science Meet*, at the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (2002). Reviewer Peter Ward describes it: 'In a museum vitrine she has assembled a droll

The context in which the work is shown seems to be crucial to the success of the project. Stephens has talked about Jubelin's work with the Powerhouse Museum on an earlier commission 'Legacies of travel and trade' (1990). Jubelin's work was conceived as an independent icon alongside a permanent exhibition about migration and settlement. When subsequently moved into a display of contemporary art 'its susceptibility to context plunged it into incomprehension'. It lost its referential power when cast as an object of contemporary 'style' and only regained its meaning when placed in an exhibition that referenced historic display (Stephen 1999, p. 105).

Context to some extent also affected the framing of *The Gay Museum* at the WA Museum. It was suggested that there be a panel at the entrance to the exhibition which made clear to visitors that this was a different kind of exhibition – one made by an artist. While this panel was designed to help people approach the exhibition it could also be seen as one which could protect the museum from potential conflict with the public. It was interesting that the Museum of Sydney did not seek to protect itself in this way – or warn the audience of 'difference'. Rather it encouraged the blurring of boundaries.³⁰

selection of intricate little Frankensteins, exquisitely crafted from glass beads and Tupperware pots. It is a bizarre bestiary: pots sprouting lizard frills, crab claws, antlers, jellyfish tendrils, bird's feet, bats wings and the like. What does it mean? The beads are the currency of colonisation, the 'specimens' symbolise material 'raided' by colonisers, the Tupperware is the 'shrouds of plastic entropy' in which we dwell. The whole piece expresses a kind of manic existentialism. Here then...is a (fine) convergence (of Science and Art) which together, create an encounter of strange, adventurous taxonomies.' (Ward 2002)

³⁰ Consequently it may have suffered the effects of shock and negative reactions from an unsuspecting public, in a way that the WA Museum avoided.

An ability to understand the possibilities of 'context' or framing, and a willingness to explore these boundaries was crucial for MoS. Emmett has said that he deliberately called on artists as he felt that:

Compared with a lot of curators who come through museum studies and become pre-occupied with registration and documentary processes and have a fetish about objects, artists just have a good eye and a good fresh mind about contemporary issues (Landman 1994).

One artist who exemplified this was Brook Andrews, a young *Waridjuri* artist who worked with the anthropological collections at the Australian museum to produce the installation *Menthen...queue here!* at *Djamu Gallery*, Customs House, Sydney, in 1999. Curator John Kirkman has said:

He symbolically liberated one hundred Aboriginal warrior shields from their restless slumber within the Australian Museum collections. These shields, some exhibited for the first time, are proof of continued resistance by the Aboriginal nations of Australia to invasion and dispossession (Kirkman 1999).

Andrews displayed the shields as if held at shoulder height, behind modern street barriers. The viewer could see marks of provenance on the back of each shield and this provenance linked the museum directly to the installation: physically, politically and emotionally in ways that went beyond just housing the exhibition.

The artist was able to move around conventions of the museum institution and open up alternative readings by using several strategies. Firstly, he disregarded a traditional linear narrative and linked these older objects with contemporary signifiers of continued activism, thus reactivating their indigenous history. He powerfully liberated them from the limited museum classification as

'display objects' by his aesthetic emphasis on the importance of the exhibition as an installation. Finally it was his use of juxtaposition that encouraged self-reflexivity, or made the audience 'think' and therefore take 'responsibility' for their shared history.

As these case studies have shown the success of artists in contemporary museums is determined by the support they have to pursue their ideas, the context in which their work is displayed and the opportunity they are given to really engage with the objects and ideas of the museum. Curators like Peter Emmett, Ann Stephen and John Kirkman corroborate that this work is important for contemporary museums and that the work of Joseph Kosuth, Narelle Jubelin and Brook Andrews are evidence of the imaginative possibilities for exhibitions when museums engage outsiders in carefully conceived long term project.

Chapter 3 – Being ‘inside and outside’ – relationships and research for *The Gay Museum*

I curated The Gay Museum at the Western Australian Museum and I did so specifically as an artist. This chapter explores how being an ‘artist in the museum’ influenced the research and making of this exhibition. Like any exhibition that seeks to represent the history of a particular community, the complex relationship between – in this case – the gay and lesbian community of WA and the museum community also influenced the exhibition. Peter Emmett has said about making culture that ‘it is ultimately about the nature of conversation and communication. How can we as people of difference and diversity converse?’ (Darbyshire 2002a)

Viv Szekeres, Director of the South Australian Migration Museum, has made the point that communication with communities involved in making exhibitions is underlined by power relationships; not only those within the communities themselves (i.e. within the ruling or working class within a given group) but also between the communities and the museum with its aims and objectives (i.e. promoting government objectives of harmony and multiculturalism). It is also expected practice that communities make representations about their history through the filter of a curator. This power relationship is based on the perceived status of the museum in which Szekeres says curators are – ‘equivalent to the authority of medical practitioners... (and are) given license to present and interpret the State’s material culture and are unchallenged, except by other practitioners’ (Szekeres 1994, p. 3).

By presenting myself to the museum as an ‘outside’ curator I embodied a different power position to that of a traditional museum curator. Although as an outside curator I had some problems and certainly needed the support of a

crucial go-between within the museum, this position allowed me to move around museum protocol when necessary and gave me more freedom to take risks. Although I acted in an expected position – being an intermediate person between the museum and the gay and lesbian community of Western Australia – my position as an artist ultimately enabled me to take full responsibility for the vision of the exhibition in a way that a museum curator could not or may not want to. This position was a challenging one and my efforts to negotiate these relationships were crucial to this representation. I will briefly clarify the three interest groups involved.

Myself

My own pre-conceived expectations, which influenced the project, came from my experience as a visual artist and from my position as a member of the gay and lesbian community. Tensions in the project mainly arose when my working methods differed from those of the staff of the museum or when my research with the gay and lesbian community challenged expectations within that community.

My 'out' and openly lived reality as a lesbian was beneficial to the project in some ways and negative in others. As I had expected it opened doors on the lesbian and gay community that would probably not have been opened to a heterosexual researcher. One older gay man, before agreeing to talk to me, asked whether I was 'one of us, one of the club?' I was emotionally connected to the project in a way that I may not have been had I been heterosexual and this too had positive and negative ramifications. I found myself humbled, honoured and moved by the generosity and courage of people who shared their stories with me. Alternatively however, some oral history interviews and the ethical issues arising from them could be confronting and disturbing.

While many people gave information generously there was some pressure to conform to and collude with the expectations of 'my' community around the 'correct' telling of 'our' history (I discuss this later under ideas about ethics). I also had to recognise and work to extend general ideas and expectations about social history exhibitions. Finally, as an artist I could only draw on my own personal practice to create a vision which I hoped was well informed by 'my' community, but nonetheless my own.

In the museum, during the research phase, I may have seemed very suspicious as an 'artist' because I wasn't seen to be 'making' anything. Although I was given a studio space at the museum, most of the research was done using a computer and a phone, both of which I had at home.³¹ The research of 'looking' at the collections was really my only chance to be seen and to talk to people. I felt that most of the staff in the WA Museum had little knowledge about the role of contemporary (and conceptual) artists and this meant I constantly had to work against stereotypical ideas about art and artists.

I also had very little knowledge of museological processes and why rules and regulations operated at the museum. Museum staff were generous teachers considering I had to learn about their practices to be able to understand and sometimes subvert them. As I learnt more, especially about the politics of collecting and representing history, my practice as an artist was challenged and invigorated. For instance I not only needed to become skilled at particular social history processes like collecting oral histories and dealing with the ethical problems that arose from them, but also to work out ways of incorporating this material into the exhibition in ways that satisfied my artistic intentions. My ideas for the exhibition swung wildly at times between the desire to make aesthetic

³¹ Once I began to 'make' artworks like UNNATURAL PASSIONS? people became a lot more interested in the exhibition.

interpretations or to follow ideas which were influenced by a social history approach. My challenge ultimately was to find a balance between the two.

I expected that because my project had been accepted and indeed supported enthusiastically at the higher levels of administration in the WA Museum, other staff would also welcome it. I found however that there were different levels of acceptance ranging from staff that practiced similar ideas within their own work at the museum and who were very supportive of the project, to great resistance to interaction on any level with me, or the project, for various reasons. These ranged from disagreement with my ideas, to the ambiguity of my position in the museum – 'neither inside nor outside'. I was not seen as 'professional' and did not fit into the existing staff hierarchy. Some staff felt my project would be superficial and reflect badly on the museum and others held negative views about previous work of artists in museums such as the Museum of Sydney.

This may suggest that issues about access, practice and interpretation are actively contested within the WA Museum and not just because of an engagement with someone outside the museum. This reflects the situation in many contemporary museums which, since the early 1990s, have been actively questioning how they can accommodate communities into their programs, recognising that this process is critical for a society that accommodates diversity (Karp 1992, p. 7). As Ivan Karp has pointed out: 'the strength and resilience of a social order resides in the capacity of civil society to aid in shaping the direction of change' (1992, p. 5).

How this direction of change happens in museums however is the challenge. One way is to allow new people with different ways of working, such as artists, into the museum. Where artists have worked in museums in the United Kingdom the importance of choosing the 'right' artist, and the support of a go-between person in the museum, as someone to translate between the artist and

the museum, has been found to be crucial to the success of projects (Latimer 2001, pp. 29-31).

Collaboration between artist and curators

I realised that for an 'outside' project like this to have any chance of success it would be necessary to have strong support from someone inside the museum who could negotiate differences and 'go into bat' for the project. Collaboration with History curator Mat Trinca was crucial for the success of the project. He was able to circumnavigate procedural difficulties that blocked progress, support me in negotiating compromises and most importantly, initiate and promote conceptual ideas to his fellow staff members that helped to change the environment within which my project operated.

I was also supervised by Andrea Witcomb, an experienced curator and academic with the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage at Curtin University. Her continual support and advice enabled me to see problems, not as specific to my situation, but as challenges that perhaps affect curatorial practice generally. Both these supervisors, with personal interest and commitment to opening up museums to 'other voices' acted as advocates for the project, helping me to link my ideas for the exhibition with conceptual ideas in academic discourse and the realities of the museum environment.

The Western Australian Museum

As I made clear in Background Chapter 1, the Western Australian Museum (WA Museum) did not differ from other Australian state museums in that it had a particular colonial history that emphasised its collections of scientific and anthropology/ ethnographic materials. Although in the 1970s it made a

commitment to social history exhibitions and in the last decade the WA Museum has been pro-active in encouraging contemporary Aboriginal cultural exhibitions and contributing to debates about environmental history, its engagement with the gay and lesbian community has been slight.

In 1995 *That Way Inclined* (TWI) art group had booked a public access gallery at the WA Museum to present an art exhibition as part of an annual month long PRIDE festival. Controversially, Director Andrew Reeves cancelled the exhibition a month before its launch. At the time, it seemed the Museum was responding to right wing political pressure, especially a media campaign organised by Richard Egan, an outspoken leader of the Australian Family Association. However reasons given by Mr Reeves for the cancellation were never very clear. They ranged from: a need for censorship, a need for the museum not to be seen to become protagonists for any position, because the artists had breached a part of their contract by releasing details to the press and finally, because communication had broken down between the two groups.³² In 1999 the Museum supported a small travelling exhibition that examined the formation and history of PRIDE WA.³³ There is also evidence that contemporary exhibitions, such as the recent *Land and People* exhibition, include gay and lesbian images and stories naturally, as part of a wider debate.

Bennett has pointed out that by asking questions about what kinds of 'civic presentations of self' are appropriate for museums to show, museums are supporting a new civic function – one oriented towards schooling a population

³² See article: (Thursday September 14, 1995), 'Banned Art exhibition goes ahead', *WestSide Observer*, no. 102, p. 1-2.

³³ Curated by Vin Pitcher and currently held in the Gay and Lesbian Archives of Western Australia.

into tolerance of, and respect for diversity (Bennett 1996, p. 1).³⁴ The varied reaction from staff at the WA Museum to the news that the Museum would be supporting an exhibition called *The Gay Museum – a history of lesbian and gay presence in Western Australia*, showed that staff there were in the grip of a struggle between accepting this new civic function and letting go of more traditional roles. Staff who did not think the museum should be involved in such an exhibition wrote:

I understood that the Museum must be seen never to 'take sides' in political issues. I feel the endorsement of the current legislation and the involvement with the politicians that support this legislation is taking the Museum down a dangerous path. Governments come - and they go! And whilst acknowledging that we should try and widen our audience I think we are in danger of losing our current audience of families and schools!

and

We don't doubt that the exhibition would probably attract attention, but does a family museum want to align itself with such a controversial and political issue? As mothers of sons, we find it highly offensive to extend legalised sodomy to 16 year-old boys, and as far as 'thinking about life and sexuality in new ways', call us old fashioned, but we'll stick to the old ways (Anonymous 2002).

³⁴ He gives the example of the *Pride Equals Power* (1994) display at the Museum of the City of New York which addressed such questions in encompassing New York's gay community within its 'civic presentation of self'. The display celebrated a succession of gay and lesbian public demonstrations from the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, perhaps the most important founding moment in New York's gay movement, through to the Lesbian and Gay Pride Weeks of the 1990s.

The views quoted above show a minority in the museum community who reflected the minority opinion in the general community during the passage of (and resistance to) gay law reform in Western Australia in 2001 and 2002 . I have explored the example of a museum that became a site for contested histories in the case study about the Museum of Sydney. That example and Mat Trinca's response to the objections above show the position from which contemporary museums, including the WA Museum, are locating themselves to be a relevant forum for debate in the community:

A Museum is not just about the past ... it is about giving people the opportunity to make sense of their place in the world - whether that is described in terms of the natural world, the history of colonial Western Australia, or indeed discussions about sexuality in the 21st century'
(Trinca 2002).

The idea that the exhibition might be controversial raised questions about how controversy impacts on contemporary museums. Caleb Williams has pointed out that controversial and taboo matters are now almost routinely investigated by Australian museums (Williams 2001, pp.1-13). He has analysed motivations for the emergence of the taboo into contemporary museums and shown that controversial themes are seen as a way to allow a whole number of benefits to occur for the museum, including the opportunity to redefine and re-invent itself by bringing in new audiences and for the museum to be seen to engage in debate about contemporary issues (2001, pp. 4-8).

The gay and lesbian community

I chose to restrict my research, as much as possible, to gay and lesbian people that lived here or who identified as West Australian. The 'gay and lesbian community' does not exist as a single entity. Rather, it may be seen as being

Rather than attempt an overview of this impossibly large community – or an attempt to legitimise individuals within it – my strategy for inclusion in the exhibition was governed by the need to find examples of people and evidence, or lack of, that could talk about ideas of 'presence': gay and lesbian people's 'appearance', the places they made their own, and their presence within the changing debate about sexuality and how it is governed.

In an effort to avoid an exhibition where participants tended to be educated, white and middle class (my own experience) I interviewed homosexual people with a range of class, race and ages to fairly represent a diversity of views. I also collected information from heterosexual people who had some connection to, or interaction with, sections of the gay and lesbian community or who publicly expressed opinions (both positive and negative) about homosexual people.

I particularly tried to interview and include information about Indigenous gay and lesbian people in Western Australia and their same-sex history. Ethical issues relating to this are discussed in depth, later in this chapter. I was mindful of Gary Wotherspoon's reminder that while there is no doubt that homosexual activity occurred amongst Aboriginal people prior to white invasion its cultural significance may have been very different (Wotherspoon 1992, p. 150).

These three 'communities' then: myself as an artist, the complex gay and lesbian community of WA and the diverse staff of the WA museum were linked by our common bonds and our differences in the research and making of *The Gay Museum*. The issues that emerged in the research phase led to deeper understandings of not only the history being unearthed but also of the way history and meaning can be interpreted.

Some issues which informed the exhibition

Research for this exhibition was largely shaped by the unique politics affecting the formation of the gay and lesbian community – the erasure of evidence of the existence of homosexual people. Reece Plunkett argues that this erasure is evidence that a different experience of life, of history, occurred for gay & lesbian people – and that how history is hidden or disallowed, is important evidence of the experience itself (Plunkett 1988). I tried therefore to examine not only the information in any research material I found, but also, how the form of the text carried, exposed or hid this information.³⁹ This different experience of history could be seen in three main research areas:

Firstly, the process of conducting **empirical research** and finding historical information on gay and lesbian people in WA was challenged by the lack of objects and other historical material held by the WA Museum and other institutions.⁴⁰ Secondly, the process of forming ideas about the exhibition and how I could make use of objects from the collections was affected by my gradual awareness of both **institutional and community expectations**. The question of institutional and personal authority was constantly being negotiated. Thirdly, I became aware of **ethical implications** inherent in creating such an exhibition. How could I question the institution that was supporting me? How could I make a 'truthful' exhibition when much of the information was subjective, or censored?

³⁹This is a strategy used in teaching painting. The form in which the information comes is just as important as the specific information. The form carries the content and the two cannot be separated. How a painting is painted has a direct bearing on its message.

⁴⁰This problem of course is significant for others in the community, such as ethnic groups, but it is compounded when institutions have purposefully suppressed primary source material or it has been eradicated by its own subject, the lesbian and gay communities themselves.

Empirical Evidence

Projects are happening worldwide in an effort to locate histories of gay and lesbian people despite erasure of evidence (The History Project 1998). For any project involving homosexual histories, including my own, lack of empirical records is a special challenge. There are many reasons for this 'lack' of evidence. Australian Historian, Gary Wotherspoon, asserts that material has simply been suppressed by the authorities that wished to deny that this behaviour existed and by families' intent on protecting their reputation and by past historians (Wotherspoon 1992, p.153).⁴¹

Wotherspoon has also pointed out that the interest in and search for a 'gay past' that emerged from the social changes of the 1960s, has led to interesting questions about the way history has been constructed, especially in Australia. He suggests that how we view history may depend on how we look for evidence. For example, he advises researchers to re-look at the same records that have previously been used to tell the 'authorised' history of homosexuality in Australia – those that have seen it as a sin, a crime, and a sickness (1992, p.152). If the idea of 'homosexuality' is redefined as 'sexually-dissident behaviour' we are able to tease out information about how the authorities viewed sexuality more generally (1992, p. 150).

Another Australian historian, Ruth Ford has also articulated ideas about how to 'look' for evidence of alternative sexualities. She points out that it is crucial to be alert to the hidden meanings of language, especially silences. Ford advocates not only the careful scrutinisation of other forms of evidence but the

⁴¹ He pointed out that for researchers interested in same sex desire, standard historical sources such as diaries, letters and journals, which exist on a wide scale in Europe, are largely lacking in Australia.

interrogation of heterosexuality, the need to analyse how heterosexuality needed homosexuality for its own definition (Ford 1996, pp. 125-126).⁴²

Researcher, Reece Plunket, amongst others, calls for the history of place, in this case Western Australia, to be rewritten with sexuality as central rather than marginal. She says to not do so is to risk writing an account in which deviant sexuality becomes merely an addendum to the existing 'facts' on Western Australia (Plunkett 1988).⁴³ These ideas are more about a contemporary desire to find and explore 'presence' of same sex desire than a campaign to justify homosexual existence via 'proof'. In this exhibition therefore the idea that the presence of same sex desire was always part of Western Australia's history was fundamental to my interpretation.

I found it particularly difficult to research past police records⁴⁴ and after some exploration I made a decision to restrict research in this area and to use other available sourced material (French 1993, pp. 51-53).⁴⁵ I found little historical

⁴² In particular when searching for evidence of lesbian desire. Ford gives the example of the image of the flapper: a symbol of heterosexual femininity in the 1920s, pointing out that it was constructed in relation to 'the mannish woman.'

⁴³ Plunkett refers to the work of Gary Kinsman in the context of Canadian history.

⁴⁴ These were especially time-consuming because homosexual acts were originally classified under the general term 'unnatural offences' and later 'indecent dealings' and these terms also covered general assault cases involving minors as well as bestiality. The statutes covering anonymity and restricted viewing last for 70 years and I was only able to follow up on one case - a man convicted in 1940. Although I could not identify him publicly I was able to talk about his story in the exhibition.

⁴⁵ There are only a few papers written about cases of sodomy in colonial Perth and these were valuable sources: See Bavin-Mizzi (1993) and Robert French's (1993) case of an 'unnatural offence' which was clearly homosexual in nature and in this case the man's photograph from the Police Gazette was also published. See "Just for fun" – a story about Edward Cahill, sentenced to seven years hard labour in 1909 for an 'unnatural offence'. (French 1993, pp. 51-53)

source material in the Battye Library.⁴⁶ This may have been due to the fact that male homosexuality was not decriminalised until 1989 in Western Australia. Of the thousands of oral histories held there I found only two mentioning the key words gay, lesbian or homosexuality. The belief that it is not a subject people will be comfortable talking about continues to impact upon the way history is collected and represented (Banwell 1988).⁴⁷ It may also be the case that while many curators in public institutions are now prepared to collect such material, this desire comes at a time when funding is scarce and they simply don't have the resources to do so.⁴⁸

I found some material in the Lesbian and Gay Archives of WA⁴⁹ and other written material through the gay and lesbian community (Mills 1988).⁵⁰ However the homosexual community itself has been complicit in the suppression, and in some cases, eradication of its own documentary evidence. For many people, safety lay in colluding to keep quiet and the annihilation of all evidence of difference. Many artefacts, such as photographs were just too dangerous to keep (Mills 1997). For some people it is still too dangerous to keep these

⁴⁶ Literature searches at the Battye Library did reveal a small amount of material (from gay organisations) that was pertinent to the project.

⁴⁷ One oral history interview with Des Banwell asks questions about his lifelong support of the WA Ballet Company but the subject of his homosexuality is never broached. Des, who was 82 when he died in 2002 lived openly as a gay man in Perth all his life. His experiences in WWII had been recorded in an oral history with Ivan King but there was so much he could have told us about life for gay men in Perth.

⁴⁸ An idea suggested in conversation by Mat Trinca, history curator at the Western Australian Museum, 2002.

⁴⁹ Found in the special collections area of Murdoch University, GALAWA holds copies of early gay and lesbian publications, personal papers and discrete collections.

⁵⁰ For instance *Jailbait* (1988) –Ray Mill's autobiography- is an unpublished manuscript detailing his early life in Bunbury (born 1933), his life as a prostitute in Melbourne and his underworld connection in the 1950s. Held in the Gay and Lesbian Archives WA at Murdoch Library.

things. I explore some of the fears and the reasons behind self-censorship under the heading 'expectations of the gay and lesbian community' further in this chapter.

The best advice I received was from researcher, Andrew Gill, who pointed me in the direction of *The Mirror*, a well-known scandal sheet. While *The Mirror* was known to have fabricated information for the sake of a good story (Davidson 1994), many of the articles I found referring to 'different sexual experience' seemed to be reported in a straightforward manner. Perhaps the subject matter was so scandalous it had no need of doctoring. Researchers in other states, who found that the tabloids reported stories that more respectable newspapers would not touch, echo this experience (Murdoch 2000, pp. 151-178).⁵¹

'Absence of Evidence' in the WA Museum

In the social history collections of the Western Australian Museum I found no objects collected specifically to represent Western Australian gay and lesbian history. This situation comes out of a history of collecting practice whereby traditional and unquestioned assumptions determined the content of museum collections.

Gaby Porter wrote that an example of this could be seen in representations of women offered in many museum displays and collections. She said that the visitor will find 'women' are represented mainly – if not exclusively – in the home, and that curators still hold a fascination in showing 'the way in which

⁵¹ See p. 178. 'These newspaper reports of indecent assault cases, cross-dressers, men, women, bizarre murders, sex change operations, and 'fairy' clubs allow us to gain an idea of where the subculture met, what they did, how they were perceived by the wider community, and how the wider community sought to deal with them.'

things work, rather than who works them, and to what end; ... and a desire to order human existence into neat hierarchical structures.' (Porter 1988, p.104)

Empiricist ways of thinking are being abandoned as museums currently grapple with the situation of many diverse communities calling on the museum to represent their history.⁵² While curators are now routinely working in collaboration with representatives from these diverse groups the problem of lack of objects is ongoing. Without a history of collecting objects from them, or objects that refer to conceptual ideas or movements that affected them – how can a community be represented?

The normal way of dealing with this problem, from a social history perspective would have been to go directly to the community for new objects. Doing that however, would have disguised the reality of the collections at this point in time, thereby obscuring the history of the museum and its part in the (non) representation of this group. It would also have denied the long-term presence of homosexual people in Western Australian history. Gay and lesbian history would have been 'added on' rather than seen as being already (although invisibly) embedded within the collections.

I realised this situation presented the challenge of representing history in alternative and creative ways. Artists have tackled this challenge before, both nationally (Armstrong 1995, p.19)⁵³, and in Western Australia (Cousins 1994, p.

⁵² Porter pointed out that when museums were anxious to avoid being seen as political and propagandist their curators justified their work as being factual and non-theoretical. Empiricism alone, Porter (1988, p. 121) asserts, is no guarantee of objectivity and she called on curators to acknowledge that their own structures of thought and practice were instrumental in representing 'reality'.

⁵³ This article explores the work of artists Anne Ferran and Anne Brennan in their exhibition *Secure the Shadow* (1995) at the Greenaway Gallery, Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. The

3),⁵⁴ and continue to offer alternative strategies to the problem of lack of objects. For alternative strategies to work, however, transparency about the 'absence of evidence' must be made obvious by the museum, as part of the discourse surrounding the subject matter of the exhibition (Porter 1988, p. 123).⁵⁵

Perhaps the most interesting opportunity presented by a 'lack of objects' – is the challenge to explore alternative interpretations of objects that have already been collected in museums – to 'recycle' objects. For my project there was certainly a lack of specific evidence in regard to lesbian and gay history in the collections but there was not a lack of objects *per se*. It was more an issue of whether I would be able to use the objects differently, to symbolically link them to ideas about the theme.

exhibition looked at the experiences of immigrant girls and destitute women accommodated at the Hyde Park Barracks between 1848 and 1886. It used documentary and archeological material placed alongside work made by the artists. For instance the artists exhibited rats' nests which had been unearthed in the 1980s that contained little pieces of cloth, threads and other textiles woven by the rats into their nests. Anne Ferran created large, close up, photographs of these nests, which were strongly lit, thus emphasizing their construction, and highlighting their remoteness from us, both physically and in time.

⁵⁴*Absence of Evidence* (1994) was a six-week exhibition and cultural event about the hidden histories of women in the Fremantle Lunatic Asylum and Female Division of Fremantle Prison. Curators Melissa Harpley and Josephine Wilson were interested in questioning the assumption and reliance of museums on using the visibility of objects to tell histories. They attempted to explore this question by inviting a diverse group of women artists together to work on a collaborative project - not to reconstruct the past or recover 'historical truth', but to respond imaginatively, as artists, to the issues thrown up by their research into the inmates' lives. Some of the creative strategies used to do this included installation, creative use of text and performance.

⁵⁵ Porter has pointed out that traditionally visitors have been kept at arm's length from museum process and that museums have not often admitted the 'partiality of records or collections, nor the difficulty of reconstructing' past histories.'

So, although empirical evidence was scarce in traditional historical records, alternative sources such as tabloid newspapers and oral histories were available and juxtaposed with 'ordinary' objects from the WA Museums collections, enabled ideas about 'presence' to be explored.

Assumption of heterosexuality

Another issue affecting the lack of material available to researchers is the assumption that people are heterosexual until proven otherwise, or that objects naturally belonged to heterosexual people. It is difficult to explore this area – awareness of possible 'difference' makes good sense in the abstract but is harder to pin down in the particular. Ruth Ford has pointed out, for example, that silence and the lack of naming has often been assumed to mean that women did not have sexual relationships, when they may have engaged in same-sex desire (Ford 1996, pp. 125-126).⁵⁶

I found an example of such a 'silence' while reading the provenance notes pertaining to a nightdress from the history collection. These notes said:

This nightdress was made and brought to Western Australia by xxx (name withheld), a British Suffragette. Xxx came to Australia in 1939 when retired and became involved in Women's Rights in Western Australia. Xxx was instrumental in getting Swan Cottages built and a home opposite King's park for single women...She died in Perth Hospital, June 1944 (West Australian Museum 1995).

⁵⁶ Ford asks us to consider the power relations in which such silences were produced and to consider 'actions' such as same-sex, long term relationships with women living and working together.

Whereas provenance for other textile items in the collection often mentioned marriage or other family connections, in this provenance, despite its detail – nothing was mentioned about her sexuality – and it was this very absence that was of interest to me. It is impossible to go back into the past to ascribe a fixed sexual identity as identity may change, depending on context and timing (Ford 1996, p.120).⁵⁷ While not wanting to posthumously ascribe a 'label' or to imaginatively construct an alternative sexual story for the owner of the nightdress, it is possible to make apparent the social and political climate that operated to force silence upon women in the area of their sexual life (Gooding 2002).⁵⁸

Ultimately the value of speculation lies – not in providing answers, but in opening up ideas about the fluidity of identity and the limitation of assumption. Just as being a suffragette and a tireless worker for women's rights for forty years is not a reliable indicator that one could have been a lesbian – marriage

⁵⁷ Ruth Ford in her discussion of the case of Monte Punshon (born 1882) draws our attention to the fact that although Monte did not use the label 'lesbian', she had an identity and a sense of herself as different, arising from her same-sex love. Ford uses the word 'identity' in the sense of belonging to a group of people with something in common – even if that group was unnamed.

⁵⁸ Janda Gooding has pointed out that this experience was not unusual for women and that many Australian women artists in the interwar years made decisions to live or spend considerable time overseas and to conceal information about their sexual relationships. 'We don't necessarily know what impelled them. Artists like Kathleen O'Connor and Agnes Goodsir moved into the social and cultural vortex of Paris in the 1920s. This allowed them to explore art and the world and through that, themselves. Working within structures largely governed by men, these women chose to shield themselves from public scrutiny by concealing aspects of themselves. That we know so little of their lives is not a reflection of the work they produced. Rather it is a telling reminder of the strategies many women were forced to adopt to survive in an environment often unwelcoming and occasionally hostile.'

also is, after all, not a reliable indicator that women are always heterosexual (Faderman 1991, p. 366).⁵⁹

Expectations and culture of the Museum

As James Clifford (1985) has pointed out, the boundaries of art, science, the aesthetic and the anthropological are not permanently fixed any more. He calls on the museum to allow the conditions of collection and display to be openly negotiated, acknowledging that a sense of ownership can be plural, and also to make more apparent how things have been viewed over time (Clifford 1985, pp. 236-246).

These ideas, while supported on a theoretical level by staff at the WA Museum were not always subscribed to on a practical level. The process of forming ideas about the exhibition was affected by my gradual awareness of the museum's expectations, protocols and restrictions. Expectations about institutional, community and personal authority and who controlled objects, access and information sometimes caused conflict. Once these were enunciated, compromises could be negotiated. I will attempt to analyse these different community expectations and the way they were dealt with, both on a broad theoretical level and from my personal experience.

Role of the curator

There is a long history of artists working in museums as illustrators (Berg 2002) and for their technical abilities in exhibition design departments. It is rare for

⁵⁹ For example Lillian Faderman refers to the 1920 autobiography of Vita Sackville West, the sometime lover of Virginia Woolfe: 'The good and pure side of herself, she wrote, was her love for her husband. On the other side, she said, stands "my perverted nature", her lesbian self which led her to passionate affairs with women'.

artists to be included on curatorial teams, or to work on initial concepts for exhibitions.⁶⁰ The artist/curator is a new participant in contemporary museum culture and their presence brings new questions about the role of the curator.

In the past the curator of a public museum, while perhaps more specialised in one discipline,⁶¹ may have had a much greater role in the creative decision-making of exhibitions, than is expected now. As museum exhibitions became larger, the tasks involved became more specialised. The 'design' of the exhibition, especially, is now often allocated to others. Although this process is seen to be 'more professional' I feel the compartmentalisation of jobs has consequences for the vitality of exhibition making.⁶²

This situation is evident at the WA Museum where exhibition making seems very compartmentalised and exhibitions quickly become 'locked down'.⁶³ The

⁶⁰ One notable exception is historian and fine art graduate Anna Haebich who worked on *Land and People* for the WA Museum in 2000.

⁶¹ History curator Matt Trinca pointed out that curators are now being expected to 'range more freely over a range of themes and ideas'. He sites his own position as 'Museum link coordinator' and that of another history curator, Sue Graham-Taylor, whose area of interest now includes 'sustainability' as examples. Personal conversation between Jo Darbyshire and Mat Trinca, 25.2.2003, recorded in personal diary documenting research process at the Western Australian Museum.

⁶² Perhaps it is not only artists who suffer from this compartmentalism - it has been criticized from inside museum culture as well. Grace Karskens, for example, asks for a real conversation, interchange and collaboration between archaeologists, historians and museum curators, rather than compartmentalised approaches. She calls for disciplinary and institutional boundaries to be set aside and for people to look beyond the confines of narrow specialist interests. See Karskens, 2000, p. 57.

⁶³ These days the curator may develop the 'idea' of the exhibition, research a topic, write or find appropriate text, and select appropriate objects and images. However, much of the selecting of objects is done via databases on a computer, removing the curator from direct physical contact with the objects, now the domain of collections managers. Finally a designer is usually given

designer for instance may have no room to alter the position of objects once they are placed in position on the computer.⁶⁴ The curator has very little chance of capitalising on meanings that may suddenly become interesting in the installation of the exhibition. There is hardly any room for 'play', for synchronicity or fortuitous 'accidents' to happen.⁶⁵

Traditionally the role of the curator was embedded in the physicality of the objects. Curators were thought of as 'keepers' who protected and 'owned' in a proprietary sense, their collections (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, pp. 78-132). The 'physicality' of the objects is perhaps not so accessible and therefore apparent to curators these days and this, perhaps, affects interpretation. Access could also be affected by a sense that 'ownership' of the collection has been passed onto or is now shared by collection managers. Wide-ranging interpretation of objects, because it is not of concern to the collections manager, is perhaps not understood as a reason to open the collection to those who may want to engage in this process. In the name of 'protecting' the objects, access to the collection may be made more difficult.

Curators in the museum world may 'plan' and to some degree manage exhibitions but rarely get to 'make' them.⁶⁶ Many artists know that it is in the

written and photographic information from which she decides on the physical dimensions of the exhibition.

⁶⁴ From a conversation with Jacques Maissin, designer at the WA Museum, June 2001, who expressed some regret over this situation.

⁶⁵ I won't expand on this idea in this essay, but there is also a sense that the curators job ends when the marketing person takes over. This is also problematic as how the exhibition is 'interpreted' at this, and all levels is crucial.

⁶⁶ To some degree, I also handed over the 'making'... some objects were installed by another artist in the exhibition and design department, Rod van der Merwe. This was because I was not allowed to handle 'wet specimens' or those involving UV light. While Rod did a wonderful job, and to my specifications, his aesthetic judgements were not always the same as mine. Overall

'making' that other, sometimes richer meanings become apparent. The role I took on for this exhibition could perhaps be considered old fashioned – I expected to be able to participate in, and control to a large part, all of the processes myself. This is not unusual in the art world however, where artists for at least the last decade, have been taught to become multi-disciplinary in their approach to making art. They not only take responsibility for how the art is made but how it is managed: the conceptual ideas behind it, its installation (how it 'works' in a site), ramifications of sponsorship and marketing requirements.

Thus, the expectations of museum curators and contemporary artists, in terms of the working process in making exhibitions, are contradictory from the beginning, and this can cause conflict. The Museum is unused to the far reaching demands of the artist who expects freedom to move in all areas, and to be trusted as a professional, while perhaps the artist (myself), finds it difficult to understand and respect the boundaries that have been built around disciplines.

My research period in the WA Museum meant an engagement with expectations that operated around the 'authority' of the museum and manifested in specific issues concerning access to the collections and classification of objects. Central to all concerns raised by my questioning of these expectations was the way in which I wanted to 'look' at objects and ultimately the interpretation of objects.

this did not matter but they did have an impact on the meaning made. For instance I would have positioned the mussels in the mussel display slightly differently.

Access to the collections

My initial aim was to physically search the social history, maritime history and some natural history collections of the WA Museum for objects I could work with in the exhibition. However gaining access to view the collections of the history department became a nearly insurmountable obstacle for the first six months of my residency. This was partly due to museum protocol restrictions but also because the way of 'looking' that I proposed and needed to pursue was not sufficiently understood or supported.

History staff told me that if I worked in a similar manner to other curators, they would be pleased to help me. The usual curatorial practice, in selecting objects to illustrate an idea, I was told, was to search the collection database on the computer. The idea of actually 'looking' at the objects in person, was continually and strenuously resisted with comments like: 'there's thousands of objects – you will never see all of them' and rather ironically 'Everything you need to see is on the database'.⁶⁷ The usual practice was to give the staff a list of the objects I wanted and they would retrieve them for me.

Although I found this resistance frustrating (if they would only let me get on with it I would have seen most of it by now!) I did try the way they suggested, and attempted to search for objects by putting key words into the database. This strategy, however, is totally inappropriate in researching themes that have not been collected for. For instance when I entered the words 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' into the WA Museum database, no entries corresponded and no objects had been collected for these categories. It was impossible for me to

⁶⁷ The problem perhaps lay in the perception that I wanted to see 'every' item, individually, when often all I needed to do was skim my eyes over many items in an area, and note the one that I found useful.

work in the manner they expected as my project was dependent on a different way of finding objects, and one that involved a personal 'looking'.

In the face of an 'absence of evidence', other strategies were needed. I wanted to make the primary basis for selection of objects a 'visual' one. As a visual artist I have been trained to 'look for' the possibilities of symbolic or metaphorical content in the material or aesthetic qualities of an object and I know that these qualities can be used powerfully to infer meaning. To do this it is necessary to view the real object, not an image of it. I also desired to make vibrant connections between objects and the seemingly random act of 'looking at' or 'browsing' of objects in the collections or on display, allowed for the pleasure of connection, while stimulating the 'work' or the process of 'making meaning'.

This basis for selection has been used by other artists working in museums⁶⁸ who point out that objects do not have one 'true' meaning or story to tell – our understanding of them is influenced by the way they are perceived. The aim is to find points of connection between objects and to make meaning through juxtaposition. These points of connection may have nothing to do with the context into which the objects were traditionally classified (Kent 1997, pp. 18-19).⁶⁹ As Hans Haacke has said 'Objects signify one thing when they are seen alone, but have a very different meaning when viewed in combination with others' (Haacke 2001, p. 51).

⁶⁸ Most importantly Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Hans Haacke at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London and Joseph Kosuth at the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

⁶⁹ A most famous example: In *'Metalwork 1723-1880'*, Wilson placed a pair of rusty slave shackles in a glass display case which contained precious silverware, thereby shocking complacent viewers into considering the conditions of the workers who had made the luxury items, and therefore the politics of the brutal slave history in which the silverware had been made.

Therefore a personal selection of objects based on a personal system of 'looking' was crucial to this project. As I needed time to adequately peruse the collections I had assumed I would be trusted to view the collections alone. History staff however, did not want to create a situation of precedence, in allowing someone who was not a staff member to be in the various collections alone.⁷⁰ They were used to brief visits by research students and it would be problematic and time consuming for a staff member to be with me in the collection areas for the amount of time I needed.

Curators of some other departments also found it difficult to facilitate me 'browsing' in their collections.⁷¹ For these departments, I ended up compromising by 'browsing' the items on public display, and requesting those, or leaving the department out of the exhibition. Conversely, this policy seemed inconsistent with that of other departments of the museum, who did welcome me into the collections area and after some time, let me wander there alone.⁷²

After six months a compromise was reached with history staff whereby staff worked in the collections area for a few hours at a time while I looked at objects in the vicinity. Although limited by time, this arrangement did allow me to find objects I could use and to make connections between them and texts I was considering. Although initially they were unwilling to engage with my project, casual comments by history department staff were invaluable, informing me of

⁷⁰ It was made clear to me that my credentials as a Masters student, as a professional, and having worked briefly on the collection a decade before, did not give me any more right to access the collection than if I had been a member of the public coming in off the street.

⁷¹ After the experience with history, I gave up the struggle to 'look' in some of the other collections in this way, not because I didn't think it wasn't feasible or worthwhile, but because I didn't have the energy necessary to argue the case anew each time.

⁷² Four areas gave me permission to 'browse': Anthropology, Aquatic Invertebrates, Crustaceans and Spiders.

some of the ways objects were usually viewed.

Contemporary artists and curators are exploring all aspects of 'looking' at collections in museums (Gleadowe 2000, p. 115).⁷³ Foremost in Australia is artist Janet Laurence who spent months exploring specimen drawers and collection areas at the Melbourne Museum. As a result, rows of birds, fossils, shells and taxidermied animals from Museum Victoria's vast collection of 16 million objects were selected by her and featured in a major installation, *Stilled Lives*, on display in The Walk, a major circulation balcony at the new Melbourne Museum, Museum Victoria.⁷⁴

Curators also have been interested in different strategies of 'looking'. For example Melissa Harpley, Denise Cook and Holly Story, who curated the exhibition *Female Irregularities* (1994) were not only interested in how pregnancy can be 'looked at', but also at how an art gallery context can allow people to 'see' the objects differently and finally, how this influenced the making of the exhibition (Harpley, Story & Cook 1994, p. 3) –but also 'reminding me that displays are artefacts in themselves.' (1994, p.10)

I foresee that physical access to museum collections will be more in demand in the future. Projects like mine will continue to ask to interpret the collections in

⁷³ In the exhibition *Thinking Aloud* (Camden Arts Centre, 1999) artist Richard Wentworth took the idea of 'browsing' to its logical conclusion, with objects selected solely on the basis of curiosity. He did not aim to test or challenge museum convention or to question the role of the exhibiting venue. Rather his selection was led only by 'curiosity' - material was foraged and found rather than strategically sought - and the exhibition assumed a similar inquisitiveness on the part of the visitor.

⁷⁴ Janet Laurence at the same time also had an associated exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, with natural history specimens borrowed from the Museum. 'The artist in the museum', (Nov. 10, 2000), Media release, Melbourne Museum, p. 1.

ways that have not been attempted before. Although data on computer may help some enquirers it will not satisfy the needs of others desiring to interact with real objects. As a more wide-ranging interpretation of museum objects is requested by society more demands will be made to see and use 'the real stuff' in museum collections.

Questioning classification

Classification is the primary law of the museum. Since 1973 – due largely to 'David Hutchinson's pioneering efforts to produce a classification scheme based on use rather than production methods' objects in the social history collection of the WA Museum have been classified according to function and/or provenance (Summerfield 1988, acknowledgements). In the natural history departments – typology or taxonomy – the practice of classifying plants, animals, and micro-organisms into increasingly broader categories, based on shared features, is the accepted classification method. While these classificatory systems may seem perfectly reasonable it is easy to forget that there are valid alternatives.

Michel Foucault makes clear just how we take our systems of classification for granted in his preface to *The Order of Things - An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Foucault 1970, pp. xv-xxiv) when he draws our attention to this example of classification:

In a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia', Borges writes that 'animals are divided into; (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (1970, p. xv)

He says of this combination of unusual juxtapositions that:

The mere act of enumeration that heaps them all together has a power of enchantment all its own... in the wonderment of this taxonomy... the thing that we apprehend in one great leap...by means...of the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that. (1970, p. xvi)

While museum classification systems are useful for ordering objects, there is also a danger that they may limit their interpretation. I found that for imagination to operate within my own project, I could not adhere to, but must work around, the boundaries or expectations, imposed by the 'authority' of classification. I was not only interested in how an object had been classified, but also how it could work despite its classification.

Just as Clifford has shown that an ethnographic object can be transformed into 'art' by its context or classification (Clifford 1988, pp. 215-251), I found the reverse could happen with social history objects that had often been classified by function alone. For instance, rummaging in the history departments warehouse, I found a small, elegant silver shoe, produced in the 1930s or 40s, which immediately referenced for me a 'social style' or fetish. On further examination I found that this curious object contained a hidden ashtray. Later, when I looked up this object on the database I was amazed to find it classified pragmatically under the category 'ashtray', which completely denied all other associated meanings. While understanding that we must have some way to classify objects, or collections would become unmanageable, the limitations of classification to that of 'function' seem all too apparent when applied to this example. In displaying the 'shoe ashtray' in the exhibition I did not ignore its 'function', but by drawing more attention to its 'style', attempted to work against

'function' being the only reading.⁷⁵

As Susan M. Pearce has discussed, museological inheritance, although supposed to be 'disciplined', is all too human (Pearce 1993, p. 122). She advocates that museologists should consider – as art historians have always done – that:

The study of form and decoration should be linked with the development of object biographies... because it is from 'cultural content'⁷⁶ and cultural meaning that all scientific importance, all designated value and all pleasure flows. (1993, p. 132)

The recognition that it is cultural perceptions, alongside classificatory systems, that shape collections, is helping to change collecting practices in new museums. In the 1991 *Collecting Policy of the National Museum of Australia*, Julie Marcus, Senior Curator of Social History acknowledged that:

There is no place left to stand on from which an individual can be properly 'objective'. This affects the claims of scientists, historians and artists alike and it also affects the claims of museums to be able to represent the truth, or even multiple truths, through which reality is constituted (Marcus 1991, p. 6).

⁷⁵ I juxtaposed the shoe ashtray with text that gave a definition of the word 'Fag' – a derogatory term for a homosexual man that originated in the 1920s, when smoking cigarettes was seen to be effeminate compared to smoking cigars.

⁷⁶ Pearce's definition of cultural content is: 'The principal problem of any classification system is that the difficulty revolves around the framing of the questions that are asked. The questions have cultural content, that is, they express a particular stance derived from contemporary culture and past history, and they provoke a cultural answer which fits into the same pattern of relationships...' (1993, p.124)

Marcus put forward the idea of an 'issue-based' collecting policy, whereby fewer objects were to be collected but their provenance was to be as broadly defined as possible and was contextualised within, and related to, broader cultural and social issues. (1991, p. 9) This collecting policy is one that opens up possibilities for interpretation.⁷⁷

Other suggestions that could also open up possibilities for interpretation include calling for the involvement of more people, with relevant insight and experience, from outside the museum (Porter 1988, p. 125). The various ways of constructing meaning from an object, or a collection, would be dependent on the variety of people asked to do so. Also, ideas about 'function' could be explored in more imaginative ways (Crossley 1989, pp. 117-120).⁷⁸

I found taxonomic classification in the natural history department, equally challenging, although far more interesting, because they concentrated on accentuating shared features; between individuals, between species, and between objects and living things. No doubt this was important scientifically, but was also interesting because of the incredible obsessiveness and intensity of

⁷⁷ Andrea Witcomb remembers that as a curator at the National Museum at this time, while assessing objects for possible accession, she was asked to 'imagine' how objects could be used in future exhibitions.

⁷⁸ For instance Louise Crossley has described the Migration Museum's *Strictly Black* exhibition as being about the 'function' of some clothes to communicate a message'. This innovative exhibition consisted of a range of costume: 'all of it black, on dressmaker's dummies in glass cases, with small labels, and no other overt interpretive devices'. The exhibition said nothing about the information traditionally collected under the classification of costume (design, manufacture, age, provenance, fabric etc.) but rather asked the audience to self-reflexively contemplate the range of messages about status, personality types and emotions that wearing 'black' clothes communicates.

the endeavour.⁷⁹ To draw attention to this obsessiveness and thus to the historical process of the museum (and away from the objects being collected), I attempted to make a collection about an object not normally collected and classified in this way. I collected a variety of domestic forks and tried to classify them taxonomically.⁸⁰ These then are exhibited as part of the *Unnatural Passions?* Installation.

I also questioned the need for specimens to always be exhibited taxonomically. How else could they be seen? In my attempts to encourage a dialogue with the natural history curators in each department I found a general initial resistance to being involved in a perceived 'social history exhibition'.⁸¹ The natural history curators became more involved as I began to play with meanings ascribed through nomenclature. For example a small crab called the *Shamefaced Crab* took on potent meaning when juxtaposed with ideas about 'bullying'. Other ways of making meaning, especially the power of visual metaphors, also became obvious choices in regard to the natural history specimens. For example putting together molluscs with 'tongues' with those that opened like luscious 'vaginas', enabled me to construct metaphors, which could talk about lesbian sex for instance, without any need for words.⁸²

⁷⁹This obsessiveness and intensity is something that artists also relate to. It is almost a necessary requirement for the making of interesting art.

⁸⁰This taxonomy was: Kingdom-Hard Things, Class-Steel objects, Order- Utensil, Family- Fork, Genus- domestic, Species- metal stemmed, Sub species- various.

⁸¹Most stressed the 'scientific' nature of their work and the fact that as scientists, they did not comment on 'the personal'. This opinion broke down however when they began to talk about their work and their personal relationship to it. They admitted a tendency to anthropomorphize some specimens. Human identification also showed itself by the puns on visual likenesses and use of common names.

⁸²I was nervous about approaching the Curator of Molluscs and requesting permission to radically re-interpret her specimens but Shirley Slack-Smith was wonderfully open to the

While within museums generally classification systems are being questioned in many ways (Karskens 2000, p. 45)⁸³ the main rule I needed to question in this exhibition was the 'unwritten' one that said that objects should be exhibited in the same way they are classified – to show function or provenance, or in the case of natural history artefacts – their scientific place in an order.

Presentability issues

The way objects and information are handled and presented in the museum is governed by both known and unspoken expectations and requirements. While safety and security of objects and the public may seem to be straightforward concerns, requirements to satisfy the concerns may also restrict and influence interpretation. Sue Latimer has said:

suggestion that her specimens could be considered 'sexy', and commented that the early scientists that named them had been far less puritan than their contemporaries.

⁸³ Grace Karskens mentions the current, fairly rigid notion of artefact categories in archaeology, where collections are sorted and catalogued, not by historical period or by thematic or functional relationship as they might be from a social history perspective, but largely by material. Thus researchers find themselves with objects that are incidentally related, for example metal pots and bronze door handles rather than butchered bones and the pots in which they were cooked.

One of the most important changes artists bring to collection management is that they ask conservators and curators to reassess how they weigh risk assessment against possible impacts for visitors. Care requirements were a challenge to the artist but the curators were also challenged to consider what was more important (Latimer 2001, pp. 31).⁸⁴

As the Temporary Exhibitions Gallery is a category A venue many conservation concerns about The Gay Museum were allayed. Some conservation restrictions were understandable and I was able to adapt my ideas around them, ⁸⁵ while others, usually attached to using costume, seemed too difficult to allow much experimentation.⁸⁶

The tendency for museums to put 'only the best example of an object on display' can also influence how objects are presented (Marcus 1991, p. 5). I

⁸⁴ Latimer discussed recent exhibitions held in England including: *Give & Take* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Artists Intervention* at the Cawthorne Victoria Jubilee Museum near Barnsley, *Paradise Revisited* at Bury Art Gallery & Museum, *Every Street: an Artist's View at the Pump House People's History Museum* in Manchester and three commissioned exhibitions for the *Art's About Manchester's (AAM) Family Friendly Project*.

⁸⁵ One example of this was when I wanted to use some silk stockings from the 1920s and the 1950s. My idea was to put these stockings on manikins legs and have the legs intertwined. This was not allowed by the conservator who said modern manikins were too harsh for the fragile nature of the materials. I adapted my ideas by laying the stockings together with legs intertwined on a Perspex support.

⁸⁶ My idea to hang two men's nightshirts from the 1850s, together in a showcase, was quickly scuttled by the collections manager who said they were too valuable to be on display, and that Conservation would never agree to me using them. Unfortunately at this early stage I was influenced by the idea that 'everything was too hard' and I did not pursue this idea. Later the conservator said that if the lighting conditions were low and the nightshirts were properly supported I would have been allowed to use them.

found myself questioning this belief when I discovered a collection of puppet heads – many in a state of decrepitude (c.1950s) – and heard a comment by an assistant curator that ‘they would probably never be used because of the state of them’. The negative physical state of these puppet heads worked against them ever being presented as (good) ‘examples of puppets’ in a traditionally curated exhibition. However, as an artist, I found their abjection the most fascinating thing about them. Their lack of status meant they could work more easily as metaphors. By lighting them in a dramatic way and highlighting their abjection I hoped to use them in the exhibition to help people identify with the nameless men and women who have been victimised and punished for their homosexuality. What was a ‘presentability’ issue for the museum became an opportunity for creativity.⁸⁷

Sanitisation of Objects

Another issue affecting the interpretation of objects in the museum is the sanitisation of evidence (and therefore information) of things not considered ‘proper’, particularly evidence concerning the body and its biological courses. This sanitisation happens on a broad cultural level, whereby accepted ‘norms’ or stereotypes are upheld by museum culture and practices, and on a more personal level, where smaller decisions, based on personal cultural beliefs are made almost unconsciously by a curator.

⁸⁷ Another presentability issue was the resistance by the collection manager to publicly acknowledge objects ‘found in the collection’ on labels in the exhibition. I found objects which carried these labels particularly interesting and thought the fact that objects had no provenance at all and had mysteriously found their ways into the collection was fascinating. I thought other people in the general community would also like this ‘mystery’. The collection manager however felt that this label did not reflect well on her position or the museum – that the public would perceive the museum as disorganised and consequently feel reluctant to donate their material. Consequently objects in the exhibition did not say ‘found in the collection’. These objects were left with no information to say where they had come from.

Leigh Summers is one of the rare museum curators to advocate not sanitising evidence in museum displays (Summers 2000, p. 1).⁸⁸ Australian museums, she maintains have constraints borne of ingrained gender assumptions, (particularly about women's bodily courses) combined with preconceived ideas regarding visitor expectations, and these continue to influence curatorial collection and exhibition.⁸⁹ Summers calls for museums to make practical and theoretical changes: to stop promoting stereotypical examples which do not reflect real lived experience or which are sanitised views of that history. To do so, it may be necessary to transgress the current taboos that surround the representation of 'the body' in museum exhibitions.

The taboo on bodily fluids includes representing activities that involve sexual pleasure. An example where this might be seen also shows the effect of personal cultural beliefs which operate on a smaller, but still powerful level – in the initial collection of objects. I was looking for some men's woollen bathers (c 1950s) to put in the exhibition. The assistant history curator said some had recently been donated and I could use them because she was not going to accession them (Darbyshire 2002b). When I asked her why not she pointed out

⁸⁸ Summers argues that the incorporation of a corporeal feminist analysis is critical in the construction of meaningful museum exhibitions that feature women's costume. This analysis, she says, takes into account both the biological courses that characterise many, but not all women's lives across time (including adolescence, menstruation, childbirth and menopause) and the female body's capacity to be constructed by, and influenced by culture.

⁸⁹ Women's garments in Australian museums are traditionally used to demonstrate technological and stylistic progression, Summers (2000, p. 5) points out, and often act as an attractive frou-frou to decorate particular historical moments, or as patronising concessions towards women's history. Material that contravenes traditional stereotypes of Victorian women as small and clean; 'big frocks' or garments soiled by sweat, and bloodied by biological events of menstruation and childbirth, along with the even less appealing bloodshed caused by sexual violence and physical assault, are rarely collected or displayed.

the 'icky' stain on the crotch of the bathers and commented that they were 'too disgusting to use'. The bathers were perfect for my purposes – to evoke ideas about male sexuality – and could symbolise the 'evidence of pleasure', or the expected outcome, from visiting a 'beat' like Swanbourne Beach.⁹⁰

The museum may prefer to collect and display a sanitised view of history, one that does not admit to a history of bodily fluids, because when there is evidence of the body being 'out of control', the usual classificatory system – function or provenance – is undermined by the 'symbolic' which may tell another story! As Indra Geidans has said 'garments close to our bodies often tell the greatest stories.' (Geidans 2002)⁹¹

Cultural decisions, especially about the body, may play a large part in controlling not only what is collected, but also impact on interpretation of the collection. Sanitisation of objects and information can be a process that closes down readings of difference, leaves out evidence of connections between our

⁹⁰ A 'beat' is common slang for a place where men go to have anonymous sex with other men. Swanbourne Beach has been a well documented male 'beat' since WWII in WA. Although perfect for my purposes, there was some resistance to allowing me to put the bathers on show. I was offered another pair of men's bathers but they just didn't have the same power to evoke a sexual experience as the first pair had. The second, clean pair could operate as a site for possible sexual pleasure, but they could not supply the possible evidence that sexual pleasure had happened. Because a decision was made to not name donors I was able to use the first pair of bathers in the exhibition alongside a quote by Leigh Summers about bodily fluids. This reference was made in the larger context of 'beats' and alongside a painting of men on a beach. I also included a manuscript which showed a photo of a man wearing similar bathers c 1950. The stain was not that obvious in the final display but the subtle reference to it was there for those that picked it up.

⁹¹ Local West Australian artist Indra Geidans recently exhibited a series of small paintings, which explicitly explored ideas about traces of the body left on clothing. 'The paintings were a reminder that the body cannot be controlled and that nature/time is working within us and leaves its evidence.'

bodies and history and shuts out important clues to larger historical references and stories (Gilborn 1982, p. 191).⁹²

Expectations and culture of the gay & lesbian Community

There were a number of issues that arose from the cultural experience and expectations of the gay and lesbian community. These were expected by myself, by the WA Museum and by Curtin University. For instance – that privacy would be respected and permission sought for all material that identified a gay or lesbian individual in the exhibition.⁹³ This was accordingly a process that occurred. As it was a huge job it did influence the amount of material, particularly photographic documentation, I used in the exhibition.

Other expectations were more difficult. Despite the practical logistics of tracking people down I found the psychological effects of having conversations about 'disclosure' far more demanding and exhausting. The degree of internalised homophobia⁹⁴ in the gay and lesbian community varied considerably but its influence was felt in many conversations and consequently in the exhibition itself. It seems that there are two unspoken 'laws' that affect (and infect) this community, both individually and in general.⁹⁵

⁹² Craig Gilborn, writing about subjecting an ordinary Coca-Cola bottle to basic research steps performed on any type of artefact being collected by a museum, invited a broader interpretation of the object and one which locates the object in relationship to our body: 'What are the sensuous (touch, sight, and so on) and psychological qualities that contribute to the effectiveness of the Coke bottle? And what kind of ritualised behaviour accompany the drinking of Coca-Cola from bottles?'

⁹³ Ethical issues that arose from research work were guided by University and Museum guidelines and are dealt with under 'ethics'.

⁹⁴ Homophobia is an irrational fear and hatred of homosexual people.

⁹⁵ I am grateful for conversations with Reece Plunket about these issues.

Firstly, the **binary opposition** of being either 'out', or 'in the closet' is a fiction. Rather, many individuals make decisions about being 'out' depending on the situation at the time.⁹⁶ Whilst most people can understand the sense that people go from being 'in the closet' to slowly emerging little by little to more public positions, it can be hard to understand the opposite occurring.⁹⁷ When it occurs, the person going back 'in the closet' must rely on the very naivety of the community he is operating in, and while maintaining ignorance in that community, he must ask for the collaboration and collusion of his lesbian and gay friends, to maintain his secrecy.

The second unspoken rule then is understood as an '**open secret**', an ambiguous 'middle ground' where everyone knows but no-one talks about it publicly. Everybody is fine as long as no one 'rocks the boat'. This can apply to individuals as well as a group. It seems to be linked to a fear of losing financial or career advantages, or perhaps, most significantly, causing trouble in one's biological family.

⁹⁶ For instance - They may be 'out' within their community group (i.e. the Loton Park Tennis Club), but not out if that group is doing something publicly (i.e. marching in the PRIDE parade). The most common and justifiable reason to be 'in' comes from those who ask for anonymity because they teach in Catholic and other religious schools. Catholic and religious institutions are the only ones exempt from the new anti discrimination laws in WA.

⁹⁷ I mentioned to a very publicly 'out' man that I had found an old *Westside Observer* magazine which had his photo on the cover. The issue, which was 13 years old, identified him as the visible president of one of the most active gay and lesbian campus groups in Australia at the time. I was surprised when he asked me not to use it in the exhibition. He said he had just started a job with a Christian Fundamentalist Adventist school as a teacher and he couldn't afford for them to find out about his sexuality.

Frequently I was asked to collude in the activity of denial.⁹⁸ I realised that people were used to friends or other gay and lesbian people colluding with them to eradicate all evidence, however miniscule, from causing embarrassment. This process made me feel a great sadness as I realised the depths to which my own community suffered homophobia and made me question my own part in making the exhibition. Every time I made the decision to remove a name or face, for whatever reason, I was aware of being complicit in the denial of a little bit of gay and lesbian history. The omissions are themselves a haunting 'presence' in the exhibition for me.

Internalised homophobia only reflects the struggle with overt homophobia in the general community. In the exhibition I tried to illustrate examples of both overt⁹⁹ and subtle¹⁰⁰ homophobia so that the general community could see the range of hatred and ignorance the gay and lesbian community had to constantly deal with. I also tried to include examples where the gay and lesbian community

⁹⁸ For example when I asked permission to use a woman's name in a label for a photograph, the woman said no that she did not want her family to see any reference to her in the exhibition. She asked me to digitally remove her from the photograph and she said 'I'm sure you understand'. I was constantly asked this question by people that did not want to be identified, and while I respected their decision, I did not want to collude in their justification.

⁹⁹ An example of overt homophobia can be seen in this quote from parliamentarian Wilson Tuckey reproduced in a local paper:

"Outlawing homosexuality would save more lives than proposed gun laws", outspoken MP Wilson Tuckey told a gun rally yesterday ... Mr Tuckey's attack on homosexuality and his reference to the Port Arthur tragedy drew applause from the male-dominated gun rally... "There is another disease which kills about 550 Australians every year, at least 30 more than are killed by guns. That is HIV-AIDS. Legislation to outlaw anal intercourse, if it received 100 percent compliance, which like guns it will not, would directly reduce HIV-AIDS by about 95 per cent." (Bruce Butler, 'Ban Gays Not Guns', *The Sunday Times*, 2 July, 1996, p. 3.)

¹⁰⁰ A more subtle example of homophobia can be found in this quote by Margaret Court: "I love homosexuals and I am here to help them because they don't have to be like that. There is a way to change." ('Crusader Court Faces a Rare Defeat', *The Australian*, 18 March 2002)

could see how it had acted through its own internalised homophobic and fearful beliefs (Davis 2002).¹⁰¹

I was transparent in the fact that internalised homophobia does exist in our community and that despite massive changes to our position in society, it is still necessary to protect the privacy of some individuals. I refused to 'digitally' change historical documents because I felt that that would have been falsely altering the historical record. By placing red dots over the faces of those in photographs, and a black dot over a person in a video, who wished to remain anonymous, for whatever reason, I was better able to draw attention to the present position that we find ourselves as a community.

Many people in the gay and lesbian and the general community were surprised at the size and scope of the exhibition. Expectations on both sides seemed to have been that 'gay and lesbian people didn't have much of a history – did they?' The feeling of pride engendered by the exhibition was reflected in many of the feedback forms. That gay and lesbian people did indeed have a very interesting history, and one that warranted a large exhibition space and proper museum consideration was a surprise to many and showed what low expectations many people in the gay and lesbian community had beforehand. It has been said that documenting a community is a way of 'making community'

¹⁰¹ The best example of this was a quote by Geoffrey Davis, (2002) which discussed the decision by CAMP to destroy the records of its existence: 'One of the great disasters, in my opinion, was when we had the meeting to dissolve CAMP, which would have been about 1988, and they decided to destroy the records. I pleaded with them ... I said, "Put them in the Batty Library. Put a 50-year embargo on them if you want to. Don't destroy them ... that's part of history!" They said it would be in the spirit of the constitution (which said all the records should be kept under lock and key) to destroy them. All the minutes and all the correspondence were destroyed...'

and by doing so – we know that we have a history and that is then how we are known.¹⁰²

Ethics

Ethics were particularly important for a project like *The Gay Museum*. Both participants from the homosexual community and the institution of the museum were vulnerable because of the controversial nature of the theme in present society. The museum had to be seen to be acting in ways that ensured the integrity of objects and information in its collections and that did not cause harm to anybody involved. The ethics of how material entrusted to the museum could be used in public displays was an issue that affected the indigenous community in particular. Finally, the 'authority' of the museum itself was questioned in the making of the exhibition and this was an ethical dilemma that needed careful handling as it affected the general museum community and the public's perception of the museum.

Julie Marcus has acknowledged that sexuality is one of the major areas of recent social concern and interest. While she agrees that such an important part of Australian history should not remain unrepresented within museum collections, she maintains that the security of private information is of utmost concern (Marcus 1991, p. 24).¹⁰³ Questions of ethical security arise not only for major institutions like the National Museum but also for smaller collecting bodies like the Gay and Lesbian Archives of WA and they certainly had a bearing on

¹⁰² This idea was developed in discussion with Reece Plunkett and her ideas are more fully discussed in her forthcoming PHD (working title 'Sex Signs') in the division of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, School of Media, Communications and Culture, 2003, Murdoch University, Western Australia

¹⁰³ Marcus asks the question of 'who would guarantee that sensitive material would not fall into insensitive, and perhaps punitive, hands?'

research and publication of *The Gay Museum*. During the course of my research I tried to be especially sensitive to issues of confidentiality.¹⁰⁴ I searched for and used material already in the public domain or loaned with the permission of the people in question. The museum, my supervisors and I rigorously questioned any action that may have caused harm to an individual or group.¹⁰⁵

I agreed that any ethical issues that arose in curating the exhibition would be handled in accordance with the policies and protocol of the WA Museum. This was particularly important in regard to the representation of indigenous people in the exhibition.

Protocol – the Aboriginal Advisory Board

I knew I would be canvassing a range of views and experience while doing research into the contemporary indigenous gay and lesbian community in Perth but I had no idea how difficult it would be to find and include research about indigenous sexuality in a historical sense. Initially I approached staff from the Anthropology Department at the WA Museum for information about the history of same-sex relationships in relation to Aboriginal people in WA. Despite the fact staff were unable to give me any references or information, it seemed assumptions of heterosexuality, as in other departments of the museum, were

¹⁰⁴ I abided by the Oral History Guidelines of Curtin University when undertaking the oral histories interviews and I tried to contact all the participants of oral history interviews that had been conducted by others.

¹⁰⁵ One example of this was when, after discussion, the decision was made that it was not appropriate to publicly acknowledge donors of the objects being used. It was felt that donors may have been upset by the implication that they or their families were 'gay' and that donors had not agreed to objects being used in such an unorthodox interpretative manner when they made their donations.

similarly applied to the history of indigenous people.¹⁰⁶

Other experts were similarly quiet. Finally I found an article by Gary Lee talking about the eroticisation of aboriginal art (Lee 2000, pp. 62-64). This article described an exhibition called *Love Magic: Erotics and Politics in Indigenous Art* held at S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney in 1999.¹⁰⁷ The exhibition was groundbreaking because it discussed sexuality from an indigenous perspective. It also identified and included homosexual behaviour under its general theme.¹⁰⁸

It was only during an oral history interview with an indigenous gay man, Robert Smith (*Vanessa*) (Smith 2002), that I was given information about homosexuality in 'pre invasion' times. Robert gave me an article that discussed the issue from a contemporary indigenous point of view (Gays and Lesbian Aboriginal Alliance: et al. 1994, pp. 1-62) and from then on I used this document as the basis on which to proceed.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ For example I asked about 'love magic' and whether it could apply to homosexual relationships? The collections manager of Anthropology said it just applied to heterosexual people and when asked 'how do you know?' he answered that 'all the literature backed it up'. I was not happy with this answer because he could not show me any literature that specifically said that. Conversation with RC recorded in diary 18.3.2002

¹⁰⁷ Lee had originally wanted to write on the on the topic of aboriginal male erotica but could find little information. His research finally led to the exhibition (co-curated with Maurice O'Riordan), and his theme of erotica, broadened to include themes such as love, romance, sexualities, sexual politics and spirituality.

¹⁰⁸ It was also interesting that the exhibition used the title *Love Magic*, answering the questions I'd asked earlier. As Dr Jim Wafer said in a talk given at the exhibition: 'Far from being a superstition, love magic is a cultural technique for developing a nuanced emotional repertoire and a rich imaginative life.' (SH Ervin Gallery, 19 Sept. 1999). Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Moya Smith cautioned me against using material from some of the anthropologists quoted in the literature review in this article, because they were 'unreliable' and one of the other anthropologists at the museum was dismissive of the article for a different reason, intimating he

Museum protocol required that I meet with and be advised by the Aboriginal Advisory Committee of the Museum, in regards to any material about indigenous people, that I wanted to display.¹¹⁰ The committee was very supportive about including contemporary Indigenous gay and lesbian people's perspective in the exhibition. However they were more worried about the historical information I wanted to use from the essay and agreed to form a sub committee to supervise what I would finally be able to use. They basically said they did not know what had happened in the past and that crucial work needed to be done talking to tribal elders in various places. Ken Colbung however pointed out that Christian experience had wiped out much traditional knowledge and perhaps forever altered aboriginal people's views of homosexual experience. Some on the committee spoke of personal experience with family members who are or were gay or lesbian.

The message I received from the members of the committee was to proceed with the exhibition. In relationship to access of the museum collections they agreed that it would be an excellent idea to ask local gay and lesbian aboriginal people to come into the museum and select something from the collection for the exhibition.

Questioning the institution

Not only did *The Gay Museum* question ideas about history and how it is collected and interpreted, it also fundamentally questioned the role of the museum. In this respect the WA Museum allowed its culture and processes to be questioned, a very difficult position for any organisation to accept, especially

didn't believe in revisionist history. Conversation with anthropologist ML, 19.6.2002. (Darbyshire b, 2002)

¹¹⁰ Aboriginal Advisory Committee included Irene Stainton, Ken Colbung, Greg Somerville and Noel Nannup.

if it has rarely been part of museum history to do so. An interesting question asked of me was – How could I question the institution that supported me? I had perhaps taken this role – as the one who questions the institution – for granted because my experience as a visual artist has been one where questioning the support structures for the making of art has always been and continues to be part of the art-historical process.¹¹¹

While the experience of having an artist working in the museum may be provocative, the experience can also be a positive one for the institution. As one curator has said when analysing the role of artists working in museums:

The territory marked by museums, and governed by their own ordering systems, creates a very specific kind of disjunctive and disconnected reality. Within this context, temporary exhibitions can offer an unusual opportunity to reflect on that reality, to disturb productively its 'tidiness', to raise questions and to suggest the complex nature of human experience (Corrin 2001, p. 7).

Perhaps one of the most provocative or difficult aspects of my project, for WA Museum staff, was a perception that the 'authority' of the museum, especially in the area of science, was being undermined by the 'frivolity' of my project. While some curators questioned being involved in an exhibition such as I proposed,

¹¹¹ From the historical practice of an artist being supported by a patron to the more modern concept where artists are supported by the state through peer-based funding. In the last decade in particular the visual arts community has been broadly questioning the role of art schools and their allegiance to institutional dictates, as they have found themselves increasingly under the control of universities. Artists have found themselves under pressure to become 'an industry' and to prove their 'relevance' to society - all of which are contradictory forces to the questioning nature and critical creativity of contemporary art.

overall, there was a willingness to question the role of the museum and to have their objects displayed in the exhibition.

This was especially apparent in the *Unnatural Passions?* Installation that directly confronted the (old) dominant paradigm of natural history departments of museums. The installation asked questions about what is natural, and how the definition of what is natural, promoted by science and religion in the past, can be re-evaluated by contemporary society.¹¹² I saw and was able to loan a recent documentary called *Out in Nature, Homosexuality in the Animal Kingdom*, which challenged the traditional scientific discourse that sex was strictly for procreative reasons and that homosexual behaviour was 'unnatural'.¹¹³ Somewhat ironically, this 'scientific' documentary was able to provide an 'authoritative backup' for the *Unnatural Passions?* Installation.

¹¹²For this artwork I proposed a group of 20 drawers (old collecting drawers no longer used by the museum) that contained collections of specimens from natural history and other collections such as holy cards and forks from outside the museum. A transparent acrylic sheet covered each drawer and on each was written one letter. The letters together spelt out the words UNNATURAL PASSIONS? The boxes were juxtaposed with a range of texts, from the bible to newspaper articles from the 1940s, which showed how homosexuals were classified and described as 'unnatural deviants' by sexologists and other 'experts'. The audience could read the large letters on each drawer and then move forward to view the specimens more intimately. Originally I had envisaged using collections of insects (with the potent image of pinned butterflies) to talk about the perhaps 'unnatural' obsessiveness of museum practice but the curator of entomology refused to allow me to use such a large part of the collection. The curator of mammals was more positive about the idea and agreed to put on display her collections of bats and rats. I also included text, by her, on her feelings about having to kill these animals for 'science', and the changing perceptions by the public to bats and rats, both of which many people have traditionally found 'unnatural'.

¹¹³Paddy Berry, head of Science and Culture in the Museum helped me gain permission from the producers to include the video in the exhibition.

This Installation was most obviously a visual artwork and so perhaps made clear that it was one person's opinion. It is also arguably more difficult to 'read', being more aesthetic in appearance than much of the other material in the exhibition and so encourages a more measured approach. The fact that the museum supported me in making this work could be seen as evidence that the museum is not afraid to encourage debate about its own role in the power structures of contemporary society.

I will finish by saying that when I presented the idea for this exhibition to the WA Museum the project could have had both positive and negative political results for the museum. The museum was asked to make what was essentially an ethical decision and in doing so were fulfilling a very important role in the general community, for, as Ivan Karp has written:

As privileged agents of civil society, museums have a fundamental obligation to take sides in the struggle over identity (and indeed cannot avoid it). In fact, this struggle is essential to the life of civil society... (Karp 1992, p. 15).

Chapter 4 - Making *The Gay Museum*

The previous chapter showed that research for *The Gay Museum* was affected by the expectations, unique histories and political choices that shaped and connected three 'communities': myself as a visual artist, the WA Museum community and the gay and lesbian community. This chapter analyses the curatorial vision for the exhibition and how it relied upon three strategies to encourage 'connection' between these communities and a fourth community – museum visitors.

The use of a multi or cross-disciplinary approach, non-linear narrative and an emphasis on aesthetic approaches in the exhibition, encouraged viewers to be self reflexive in the way they 'read' or interpreted the range of material presented. A commitment to exploring 'difference' was evident in this material but an equal commitment to presenting 'personal testimony' enabled viewers to connect on a personal level, whatever political or sexual position they occupied.

Despite their history of using different working methods in the making of exhibitions, visual artists and museum professionals can learn from and influence each other, and in a period where collections are under threat from calls to 'virtualise', can collaborate to explore new ways to interpret and use objects from museum collections. As this exhibition shows, collaboration between artists and museums can open up new possibilities for innovative exhibitions.

Strategies from Museology

Multi or cross-disciplinary approaches are growing in contemporary exhibition making and I used them throughout the exhibition. Despite the

problems I initially encountered, boundaries between natural history, social history and anthropology were successfully dissolved to encourage plural identities and readings of material that would normally be limited by traditional classification. With the aim of inclusivity, a multi-disciplinary approach included importing material from outside the museum – from the gay and lesbian community, the general community and art museums.

There was a positive response from the audience to the breaking down of institutional hierarchies that a multi-disciplinary approach represents. Whilst members of the public may not necessarily understand the history of disciplines in the museum, they may subconsciously understand when this hierarchy is absent:

I've just come back from the exhibition and its beautiful. I keep wanting to say its really democratic, it avoids all the clichés yet reworks them and lets lots of different voices play against each other, and its kind and inviting to its viewer and not snobby... (Kelleher 2003)

Whereas objects from museum collections were taken out of context or used metaphorically, materials and objects from outside the museum were often used to show an archival record or to play with notions of 'proof'. Using outside objects may help to draw attention to what has not been collected by the museum and what may be unusual for the museum to include. For instance I loaned artworks from the Kerry Stokes and Edith Cowan Collections to help break down the division between art gallery and history museum. These paintings were used to speak symbolically, something rarely done in a social history context, where perhaps their 'restlessness of meaning' is seen as

problematic.¹¹⁴ I chose the painting, *The Mortal Storm – Tombstones* (Painted by artist Brad Levido in 1988) to embody the complex feelings about loss and death, experienced by many people, not only those in the gay community, but also in the general community, over AIDS.

Perhaps the most important reason for using a multi-disciplinary approach is the one advocated by Kosuth: to return the process of 'making meaning' to the viewer. This approach is the most political of all the processes involved in making the exhibition because by its very nature it questions the 'authority' of the institution. Like Kosuth I did not provide a master narrative or didactic panels. All forms of text were treated similarly. For example, information contained in the tabloid *The Mirror* was presented as no more or less important than other sources of information. I invited the audience to actively think about, not only the messages, but the purposes and nature of the texts that contained them.

Originally I worked against a traditional linear narrative dominating the exhibition by attempting to create **non-linear narratives** – using quotes and broad themes – to link history to contemporary experience in ways that surprised and moved people. Using a variety of quotes, from different times, next to each other meant a variety of 'lived' experiences could be presented and these were linked, more by intensity, drama and emotion, than chronological time.

However my ideas changed as the exhibition began to take shape and I realised that some quotes benefited from being grounded in chronology at certain points. I then altered course to include specific quotes to show that gay

¹¹⁴ The museum tends to use non-aboriginal artworks in illustrative or decorative ways or in relation to a particular provenance in exhibitions. It rarely uses non-aboriginal artworks to speak about symbolic meaning or personal identification in relation to a theme.

and lesbian experience did not operate in a vacuum but was connected to broader political and social changes happening in Australia. An example could be seen in the words of an activist explaining why he became involved in the fledgling Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP WA):

I had a sense of feeling 'something's happening!' The Vietnam War movement had a huge impact on Australia. It made ordinary people see that you could do something ... (Davis 2002)

It was also important to make clear the way society changed its views on homosexuality and how this was dependent on the events of the times. An example can be seen in the changing views about 'drag'. Contemporary knowledge accepts drag as a fun but perhaps superficial activity. When the (largely unacknowledged) importance of drag in the work of the entertainment troops and their contribution to the war effort of the mid 'forties is understood, drag can be viewed differently.¹¹⁵

So, although chronology was important for some parts of the exhibition, a non-linear approach was pursued elsewhere, especially when I wanted to talk about experiences of life lived across large expanses of time and yet connected to understandings of a particular location or place.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ I tried to draw attention to this and to its more subversive role during the post-war vilification of homosexuals - the scapegoating of communists and homosexuals in the USA, Great Britain and Australia in the McCarthy period.

¹¹⁶ An example of this can be seen in the material collected together under the theme of 'sea'. This material ranged from an account of experience of life in 1727 - when being caught having sex together meant certain death for two young sailors - to the experience of a young woman in the navy in 1991, when being similarly caught meant humiliation but to some degree also humour and a sense that times were changing.

Perhaps the most interesting example of a non-linear approach was the display that accompanied the oral history text of Robert Smith or *Vanessa*, a 52-year-old Nyoongar Sistergirl (Smith 2002). Robert had loaned an evening dress, high heel shoes and a handbag for the exhibition.¹¹⁷ This dress was draped with a kangaroo skin cloak or *buka*.¹¹⁸ This *buka* was historically important to Nyoongar people because it had been the one Nyoongar Elder Mr Ken Colbung had used to transport the remains of Yagan from Britain to Australia in 1997. Mr Colbung's support of Robert and of the project in general was very important as it symbolised public acceptance of homosexuality by a respected Nyoongar elder. More importantly, his actions made a strong visible statement that supported the link between traditional community responsibility and contemporary gay life. Robert presented himself as a complex person: one able to reconcile, balance and celebrate his connections to traditional Nyoongar culture and his contemporary gay identity.

Hopefully this unusual display made people stop and think, not only about the contrast between the glamorous dress and the fur cloak but about the relationship between nature and culture itself and the divide that is often constructed to separate them, particularly in discourse about Indigenous people. This approach also opened up questions about how same-sex relationships happened pre-white invasion. Although they may be impossible to

¹¹⁷ These were clothes he had worn as Chairperson of the 3rd Anwernekhena National Indigenous Gay and Transgender/Sistergirl Sexual Health Conference in Queensland, May 2002.

¹¹⁸ Robert was asked to choose an appropriate object from the museum's anthropological collections to represent himself and his sexuality. As Robert's grandfather Ted Smith had been a prodigious kangaroo hunter and had used earnings from hunting and tanning kangaroo skins to buy 3,500 acres of land in Kojonup, in the 1920s, Robert asked to use a *buka*. As the *buka* in the museum's collection was deemed to be too fragile, staff from the anthropology department negotiated with Ken Colbung to use his personal kangaroo cloak.

answer, a non-linear approach allows for the possibility that these relationships did exist.

While there was a semi-chronological narrative for those that wanted to follow one, leading from right to left around the walls of the exhibition, the freedom that a non-linear narrative approach gives, also operated. There was no 'right way' to move through the exhibition. Viewers could engage with the exhibition at any stage in the exhibition and move where they pleased.

Strategies from the Visual Arts - Aesthetic approaches

In making the exhibition I adopted various strategies from the visual arts to evoke **aesthetic** responses in the audience and to explore aesthetic qualities found in objects from the collections. An aesthetic approach also manifested as an awareness of the importance of the whole exhibition as an installation.

Evoking an aesthetic response

I wanted to show the power of objects to evoke an emotional response or 'bodily identification' in viewers and suggest this as a valid way to understand experience, or to contextualise ideas (Hall 2002).¹¹⁹ This was achieved in

¹¹⁹ An example of a small museum which operates on this understanding is Denis Severs' House in Spitalfields, London. This museum is a 300 year old house set up to provide an 'experience'. As each visitor tours the house alone they become enveloped by the sights, sounds and smells of the past. They see a kettle whistle on a cob, smell chestnuts roasting and hear voices in the next room. Each room is packed with curios from the past and items are left as if their occupants have just left the room. The manager Mick Pedroli says that what we do not see is essential to what we do. He would like visitors to use their senses, their whole being – to absorb the house

several ways: by the dramatic use of light, by the use of 'multiples' and by drawing attention to the metaphorical properties of material objects.

The gallery space was designed to be generally dark with pools of light illuminating pockets of information and creating varied areas of interest and mystery. Even though there was a lot of text on the walls the dark areas between blocks of texts worked successfully to provide an illusion of space.¹²⁰ Light was used to reflect ideas about absence and the lack of material objects to define history. Perhaps the 'darkest' section was the area first experienced by the viewer – the wall dealing with Sodomy.

The puppet box in the Sodomy section asked the viewer to imagine the nameless men and women imprisoned and punished in our colonial past for homosexual activities. The tragedy of these past lives is represented by a collection of twenty half formed puppet heads positioned on a long dark shelf, enlightened by tiny lights from above. The lighting was designed to replicate the effect of a torch used to make faces or objects 'spooky'. Juxtaposed with this installation was text about legal punishment for homosexuality, including the death penalty (Bavin-Mizzi 1993, pp. 102-120).¹²¹

and its atmosphere – saying 'we are trained to simply look at things with the need to identify them, rather than experiencing an atmosphere.'

¹²⁰ This strategy comes from my experience of teaching painting where students are often asked to consider the idea of providing space for 'nothing to happen', an important tool in providing contrast and power to the area(s) in the painting where the artist is trying to focus attention.

¹²¹ The death penalty was revised to life imprisonment in 1865 and then in 1901 was further revised to a sentence of 14 years imprisonment with or without a whipping. Bavin-Mizzi gives examples of men convicted under the 'Criminal Code Act, 1902', Western Australian Acts of Parliament, 1901-02, 1 & 2 Edwd. 7, Act no 14.

Accentuating the multiplicity of small and seemingly commonplace objects is another common visual art strategy. In one display case the viewer came across 60 pieces of used soap together with an electric shock machine (1910) and text about attempts to 'change' homosexuals. Viewers could perhaps identify with the experience of washing their own body as they wondered about the soap. The bodily identification with an action – in this case – trying to wash away the idea that you are 'dirty', is something that can be emotionally exploited. The sheer number of soaps scraps may remind them of something 'more sinister' – the obsessive nature of guilt and therefore of the effect of the debilitating attempts by medical and religious bodies to change homosexual people.¹²²

This example also shows how, by drawing attention to the materiality of objects, an artist connects 'ideas' to the body, as it is through our senses that we understand 'materiality'. This is a valuable strategy when ideas are in danger of being clichéd or stereotyped. For example I tried to draw attention away from the visual images that so often stereotype lesbian sexuality and towards the physical experience. I concentrated on the texture of objects to evoke feeling: the touch of fur, the wetness of tongues and mouths. Because it is based on touch this strategy places a 'different' and 'imagined' sexual experience in the realm of a more general understanding of sexual experience.

Aesthetic approaches to making exhibitions were crucial for *The Gay Museum* because the exhibition was concerned with revelation. To achieve a sense that hidden history was being uncovered, an aesthetic approach to both ideas and objects was predicated on interrogating the rules of the museum.

¹²² Another example of the power of multiples over one example of an artefact could be seen in the various responses to the 'wave of rats' that swept along inside the UNNATURAL PASSIONS? Installation.

Questioning and breaking rules

For Alberto Manguel, the whole notion on which he sees the museum is based – a collective display for a collected audience – must be undermined, dispelled, and destroyed, for the experience of visiting a museum to have a sense beyond mere tourism. He says:

For a museum to be a place of revelation, the idea of the museum itself must be contested... In order to have an aesthetic experience, therefore ... we need to disrupt the perceived order, confront it and question it. To break rules we need rules, and these a museum provide (Manguel 1996, p.13).

As gay and lesbian experience or history was not represented in the WA Museum I questioned the entrenched views that formed and restricted the scope of the museum. I consciously attempted to make new meanings by working against how objects were usually collected, sanitised and displayed.

Collection practices

As I discussed earlier, unspoken rules are often supported by assumptions – particularly the assumption that all objects in the collections belonged to, or were used by, heterosexual people. In a situation where one cannot go back in time to ask for more information the researcher must also be cautious of making assumptions. Thus, when I displayed the 'Nightdress' that I referred to earlier, I did not claim it had belonged to a lesbian but I tried to show that alternative readings of the provenance of the object could open up the possibility it might have – and to make apparent to some degree the assumptions behind collecting practices.

Another assumption that often frames collecting practices – that all people follow the trajectory of birth, heterosexual marriage, and so on until death – does not ring true for most gay and lesbian people. As an anonymous participant in a research project about older lesbians points out:

My life is not so much a matter of getting on the train like heterosexual women and going from station to station ... but of 'having adventures', not knowing what life has in store, and not having a path to follow (Davis 2000, p. 149).

I attempted to include more diverse experiences of life by telling personal stories¹²³ and searching for evidence of a different experience of life, in objects that had particular private meaning for the donor but which also embodied significance for the gay and lesbian community. The best example of this was Ray Currell's 'trophies'. Like any trophies, his are a record of private achievement and like many displays in the museum, honour a man who has contributed to the history of Western Australia.

The difference here is that they memorialise his contribution on behalf of a marginalised and largely despised group in society, one that the museum has hardly recognised. They also represent a history of fundraising events, remembrance of people who have died, a life of pride and participation and sporting events that trace the national and international growth of the gay and lesbian movement. There is both humour and humility in the display of common trophies in one's home and I hoped to bring some of these feelings from the

¹²³ Examples of these personal stories included how one man adopted his son using Chinese customary law in the 1970s and how a woman found personal freedom working with an all woman trucking company in the North West in the 1980s. These stories were not chosen to make explicit their difference from the 'norm' or to represent 'alternative' lifestyles. They were the 'norm' for gay and lesbian people.

private to the public arena, so that people could identify with this life lived, despite the fact it is not considered 'the norm'.

Sanitisation

The idea that the museum is the arbiter of 'good taste' was also challenged. Gary Wotherspoon has pointed out that homosexuality has never been in 'good taste' and records of sexual difference have been sanitised repeatedly to preserve an idea of a society in which same sex attraction was both unrecognised and yet considered 'unnatural'. Heterosexual history has still not been displaced as a meta-narrative in most social history exhibitions despite alternative evidence (Strange 2000, p. 3).¹²⁴

To counter this I presented both 'unsanitary objects' (the 'bathers' with the possible semen stain, which I have previously discussed) and 'unsanitary ideas' (like definitions of cunnilingus or sodomy). However, I did not set out to shock in the voyeuristic way that the public or museum staff may have expected. I tried to avoid the explicit visual images that so often stereotype gay and lesbian sexuality.

Display

I resisted the usual museum practice of displaying objects in a way that illustrated function or provenance or showed a natural history 'order'. Rather I explored possible symbolic or metaphorical meanings of objects.¹²⁵ Peter

¹²⁴ Carolyn Strange (2000) comments on the glaring lack of notice given to race, gender and homosexuality in the new Port Arthur Visitors Centre. See especially p.3 for lack of homosexual history.

¹²⁵ A very basic example of this strategy was the example of a policeman glove puppet (c1940s - 50s). By taking the puppet out of its normal context, (the children's toy section) and asking in what other contexts it could be used, new meanings opened up. The policeman puppet fortuitously demonstrated rather luscious red lips, calling to mind lipstick and the incongruity of

Emmett considers artists are 'almost curators' because they love to engage with the object. He says:

The old style curator was the 'keeper of the object' and would tell the story behind the object, whereas the 'new' curator looks at the way you put things together to make connections and attempts to bring out the relationship between objects and stories [Darbyshire, 2002 #125

Juxtaposition was one of the main strategies used to achieve this. I 'played' with objects and text to provide alternative readings that included irony and humour. There are many examples where I used this strategy in the exhibition but one was particularly effective in stimulating viewers to be self-reflexive. Six blue glass buttons were juxtaposed with a small quote: 'Clitores – one often sees companion lovers wearing rings on their fingers, with the clitoris of a dead friend as a setting.' (Wittig 1976, p. 61)

This quote by Monique Wittig, from her fictional *Lesbian Peoples, Materials for a Dictionary* (1976) caused some uncertainty for viewers who up to this point had only been presented with 'real' dictionary definitions. The expectation that the museum only presented 'facts' was suddenly in doubt. Thus the many ways an object can speak, depending on who is creating the context and position from which it speaks, is made apparent.

A challenging rule of the museum for contemporary artists is the security requirements expected of all displays. In the past most museum objects had to be kept behind acrylic or glass. While security issues are important I would argue that this process has tended to homogenise exhibitions. This was exemplified in exhibitions where there was only one way of 'seeing' an object,

this in a figure of authority. When I recalled the role of policemen and their harassment and arrests of homosexual men in the 50's this puppet took on a strong ironic reading – and begged to act as a symbol of the hypocritical stance of authorities of the time.

especially when showcases had the viewer looking in and down on the objects and the objects could only 'sit'.¹²⁶ In contemporary exhibitions, exceptions to this rule are starting to be made.¹²⁷

I attempted to create a balance where the viewer was aware of this security requirement and yet it did not overpower the exhibition. With expertise from the exhibition and design department, I experimented with alternative 'showcases' and designed shelves that would be held between some of the 3m wall columns. The aim was to draw the viewers 'eye' horizontally along the shelves, at shoulder height, as if the viewer was looking at the precious and intimate objects on a private mantelpiece.¹²⁸

I also tried to work against a common belief held in the museum – that people will steal anything not protected. I enjoyed the fact that the moveable walls in the gallery were made of metal and that anything could be fixed to them with

¹²⁶ It is hard to make objects float or play in a traditional square or rectangular showcase.

¹²⁷ The natural history display in West Australia: Land and People attempts to minimize acrylic sheeting surrounding 'real' artefacts and there are various ways of looking at objects in From Diamonds to Dinosaurs – both recent exhibitions at the WA Museum. Objects which are able to be touched are often replicas and this sends its own message to an audience.

¹²⁸ Two of these were made: the lesbian sex wall and the drag shelf. A one metre high sheet of acrylic was to be hung in front of the shelves and the top of the shelf was to be left open. In the final construction the one metre acrylic was mistakenly cut down to thirty five cms high. Although this worked better for my purposes of eliminating the division between objects and audience and inviting a greater intimacy, it did not now allow adequate security for the objects, and a security alarm with a laser beam was finally erected to cover the possibility of someone putting their arm over the top of the acrylic. I also asked for smaller shelves to be made: the puffer box and the dandy box, which were covered in a sheet of acrylic. This was because the museum did not have small display boxes and these tiny objects were lost in the bigger display cases.

magnetic strips. They were perfect for *Tinky winky* fridge magnets¹²⁹ – objects, which I left on the wall to be played with. To date *Tinky winky* has not been souvenired!

The use of text as a visual medium was a strategy inspired by Kosuth's work in the Brooklyn Museum. Text was placed on the walls of the gallery, in vinyl lettering and on black foam-board¹³⁰. Occasional large text such as 'Invisibility – our safety and trap' were used to break the pattern of the columns, which dominated the exhibition space and to draw viewers through the space.

While the same font was used in all quotes throughout the exhibition the size of the font was varied considerably. My aim was to draw attention to specific words and to the way that each text block was a quote – separate to the others – and yet somehow connected. As I did not expect viewers to read everything in the exhibition, or to follow 'one story', I gave people a variety of sized text to choose from.¹³¹

I also wanted to remind viewers of the habits we get into as museum 'goers'. For instance I drew attention to information that would normally be overlooked because it fell at the bottom of the museum label hierarchy – object labels. I asked that the object label for the *Mantrap* be made a large font size and yet

¹²⁹ Tinky winky is a character from the TeleTubbies television show and has supposedly become a gay icon because he carries a handbag. I had supplied these objects myself so could afford to experiment. I also made a scan of tinky winky so that I could make a replacement if he was stolen.

¹³⁰ To match the colour of the walls.

¹³¹ A viewer could skim the largest texts and pick up crucial information at an overview level or be drawn into reading longer pieces of text or 'stories' in areas that interested them.

still be in the same style as an object label. This was to encourage viewers to look around for the missing object and find it suspended over their heads.¹³²

I deliberately laid text onto the walls themselves rather than onto text panels that are normally hung in front of the walls. This was important because I wanted to emphasise that the content of the exhibition had a relationship with the very fabric of the building – it was not just a superficial ‘temporary’ exhibition that floated in the space without affecting the nature of the museum in any way.

Perhaps the most important evidence of this acceptance by the museum to ‘own’ the exhibition was their agreement to allow my pink neon artwork (the word ‘GAY’) to be hung in a museum window, facing a major road. Its prominence underlined the title of the exhibition and perhaps jokingly suggested the museum had ‘come out’. I felt it was very brave of the museum to allow me to go so far in taking over the museum in this way.

Although *The Gay Museum* could be seen as exploring and displaying a potentially controversial subject – sexuality – the communities involved consciously worked against creating ‘controversy’ in terms of a ‘sensationalised’ view of gay and lesbian history. Any potential controversy was anticipated and considered as the exhibition was made.¹³³

¹³² I also wanted small and specific quotes to be connected to some object labels. All these ‘exceptions to the rule’ caused some distress to the graphic designer, who was afraid my approach would look ‘messy’ and who was used to the convention of designing under ‘styles’ that would not normally be breached.

¹³³ For example a decision was made that donors names would not be made public when objects from the history collections were displayed. Also the museum took the cautionary action of placing a visible warning sign at the entrance of the display suggesting that parents should accompany children under the age of 16 into the exhibition.

I felt I was not censored in any way by the museum in regards to the content of the exhibition. However, while some of my ideas may have been provocative, I didn't feel the need to include particularly obscene or contentious images. Rather my approach was to explore objects metaphorically and for the exhibition to have a 'poetic' and subtle feel. This may have disappointed some parts of the audience and non-controversy may mean large numbers of people did not come to see the exhibition (as per the Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australian in 1995).¹³⁴ A non-controversial approach however, may actually work in the favour of the museum in the long term because it does not exploit the community involved.¹³⁵

As Saumarez Smith has written:

The best museum displays are often those which are most evidently self-conscious, heightening the spectator's awareness of the means of representation, involving the spectator in the process of display. These ideas can be formulated into a set of requirements: that there should be a mixed style of presentation; that there should be a degree of

¹³⁴ 'Nearly 40,000 people attended the Art Gallery of WA over the past two months to view the controversial Robert Mapplethorpe Retrospective. Enormous interest in the exhibition was sparked by the announcement that Healthway had withdrawn a funding proposal due to the controversial nature of some of the photographs. Health minister Graham Kierath weighed into the debate, claiming that the exhibition contained depraved images of gay men engaging in anal sex.' WestSide Observer, August 17, 1995, p. 5.

¹³⁵ What I mean by this is that aspects of any marginalised community may be easily 'sensationalised' to attract attention (i.e. that indigenous people may once have participated in cannibalistic rituals). I feel that many people went to see the images by Mapplethorpe at the WA Art Gallery because the press had sensationalised them. The Art Gallery was in some way complicit in the situation and benefited from it. Although they defended him as an 'artist', Mapplethorpe's position as a 'gay man' was nevertheless exploited by them. Although the straight community may not have registered the 'double-edged' support offered by the gallery, the gay and lesbian community did.

audience involvement in the methods of display; that there should be an awareness of the amount of artificiality in methods of display; and that there should be an awareness of different but equally legitimate, methods of interpretation (Saumarez Smith 1989, p.20).

I feel that all these requirements were satisfied in *The Gay Museum*. While the audience were aware that it was an artist's vision that created the exhibition, the range of strategies used in the display encouraged them to freely interpret the variety of material presented. This freedom to interpret reflects changes in society and the role of institutions in representing knowledge.

Conclusion: Working together

This project brought communities together to deal with a potentially controversial theme. In the process of making *The Gay Museum* the communities involved were inspired and changed. Strategies and working methods from new curatorial practice in contemporary museums and from the visual arts were used to create an exhibition that ultimately made a difference to how artists, the WA Museum and gay and lesbian people in WA are seen by the West Australian community.

The most important relationship was perhaps the one that developed in the collaboration between the artist and the museum. What each learned or 'used' from the other had beneficial outcomes for each party concerned as well as for the exhibition. So, in the dynamic field of interpretation what can artists and museums learn from each other?

I argue that artists can contribute to the re-vitalisation of the role of curator in museums through collaboration. Also artists can offer deeper understandings about how exhibitions function and they can suggest new ways of approaching and interpreting objects in museum collections.

The strengths of Museums are that they can contribute 'real' objects in an increasingly 'virtual' world, that they can offer new opportunities for artists to operate in a larger arena in terms of audience and that they have the resources and position to really effect change on an important level in society.

What became obvious in my eighteen months residency at the WA Museum were the different working methods employed by visual artists and museum

professionals in the making of exhibitions. These working methods influence the nature and vitality of exhibitions for both communities.

Traditionally artists work in an arena whereby a team of artists or professionals come together, usually temporarily, to manifest a particular vision of the artist or artistic director. This process might happen for a solo exhibition, a group exhibition, public art productions and festivals. Other people's creative input is mandatory to the production but the original vision must be understood and supported by the whole team in order for a good project to work. It is understood that if you don't support the creative vision then you are better off not working on the project. Although this system seems chaotic or messy, and is insecure in terms of employment for the people involved, the final loyalty is nevertheless usually to the vision of the project itself.¹³⁶

The down side is that, for artists exhibiting in galleries, there is a continual frustration that the work is often seen by only a tiny part of the community. While it may be perceptive, innovative and exciting work, it may not be able to effect change in the way the artist hopes. Frequently accusations of 'elitism' frustrate artists who seek to communicate to a general audience. Alternatively, cries to put the work in 'shopping centres' – to make it more accessible – are equally as frustrating, because as I have discussed previously, all cultural objects are affected by the context they are put into.

Museums can provide valuable opportunities for artists and this project was a wonderful example. This opportunity enabled me to work with the physical and staff resources of the museum to fully develop my creative ideas, conceptually

¹³⁶ This approach has been put under increasing pressure by funding bodies such as Healthways in recent years – where exhibitions are only funded when they are linked to a social health message.

and materially, and to reach a large and diverse audience through an exhibition. I learnt much from the process of considering museum requirements relating to the general public and through developing skills around compromise and collaboration that came with the involvement of a variety of people in the project. While artists may bring with them a strong vision and ways to achieve the creation of that vision – it is a new challenge for them to include the museum community in that vision, so that they feel that they ‘own’ the project.

Exhibitions seem to be made differently in museums. The curatorial vision is seen as only one of a number of factors in the production of the exhibition, not as the crucial ‘voice’, as it would be in the visual art field. Using the WA Museum as an example I could see that although staff called it a ‘teamwork’ approach, there was a great compartmentalisation, or strong division between people working with ideas, those working with objects and those working in design.

There also seems to be the sense that the boundaries of these separate jobs must be defended. I felt the definition of ‘teamwork’ was unspecified and that the vision of exhibitions often suffered because of other agendas. These agendas include a fixed group of employees who must be used on each project whether they have any personal interest in the project at all, political agendas (due to the museum being a government agency) and entrenched museum policies and beliefs which impose their own concerns and constraints.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ A team approach could perhaps be understood as one where the curator’s vision is supported unequivocally. This does not mean that no one except the curator can have creative input. On the contrary, this approach can stimulate real collaboration, such as at the Museum of Sydney.

Compartmentalisation can unfortunately reflect homogeneity – a deadening 'sameness' in exhibitions. Museums can perhaps learn from the visual arts that how exhibitions are made reflect 'unspoken' ideas about how the museum views its audience and what it expects of them. Also there could be more recognition by museum staff that, as in the visual arts, a strong curatorial vision for an exhibition needs to be supported. This is so that it can involve, not only the ideas on which it is based, but on strong and interesting connections between those ideas and the materials used (objects from the collection) and further, that the design of the exhibition should not be seen as separate, but is also based on the curators vision and on the connection between objects and ideas.

Homogeneity can also affect museum exhibitions that attempt to represent particular communities. What is 'safe' may often be what is ultimately represented. This may be understandable, but often creativity can be eroded, along with public interest. Viv Szekeres makes the point that emotion or passionate opinions are often the casualty of negotiations about what history is told (Szekeres 1994, p.2).

It is in these situations in particular that a visual artist,¹³⁸ in collaboration with a museum curator, could be employed to work on the exhibition and be supported by the museum to extend and explore their particular 'take' on the issue. *The Gay Museum* was an example of such collaboration and the role of the museum curator and the artist, as collaborators, could be seen as a partnership that stimulated and provoked as well as mediated.

¹³⁸ Or another person who has a strong creative vision - writer, photographer, filmmaker, historian, academic, etc.

One of the strongest contributions the museum makes to the community is the resource of its extensive collections. Curators, under some pressure to limit the collection of material objects in museum collections and to instead 'virtualise' collections, argue that the history of the object is embedded in its physical property – that it marks the passage of time - and that one can read the history of use by looking at the object (Benjamin 1968, p. 223).

In the context of this debate, and in the defence of objects, artists can support curators. I predict that there will be more calls to use museum collections in the future, as the world becomes more 'virtualised'. Artists in particular see collections as valuable reservoirs of possible material to use to embody ideas. If the museum chooses to embrace artists and their ideas it may be one way to highlight and demonstrate the amazing and valuable nature of the collections they hold and protect.

Artists offer ways to extend the range of possibilities for interpretation of objects, showing that objects can be used to make meaning in ways that images cannot. While a clever graphic designer can exploit a 2D image, the materiality of an object can be explored in so many more ways.¹³⁹ Strategies from the visual arts can reinvigorate collections because their purpose is to ask questions about ways of seeing and ways of representation. Whether a museum wants to interpret their collections in these ways, however, is perhaps the question.

Historically interpretation has been linked to scholarly knowledge and authority in the museum. There is some resistance to the idea that other people can have valid interpretation ideas and that they may want to use the museum

¹³⁹ Its physical dimension for instance is an important element: its wetness or dryness, its heaviness, its rareness in existing, its relationship to a body and thus its relationship to humanity – all these things, and more, can be vital elements to make meaning.

collections to manifest these. Grace Karskens, for instance, criticizes the Museum of Sydney, saying that narratives, connections and evaluations in their displays were deliberately erased or avoided (Karskens 2000, p. 55). Her argument perhaps reflects a fear that with a greater freedom to 'interpret' artefacts and objects, there is also a greater danger that some interpretation will verge on being wrong and even dangerous. Perhaps so – but I argue that, equally dangerous is the chance that, as in the past, narrow or didactic interpretations will be perceived as being the right ones.

Perhaps the greatest contribution museums can make is to use their resources and position to really effect change on an important level in society. Just as museums have been seen to respond to calls for more access and better representation of diverse groups in the community, they can also effect change by encouraging and promoting a greater diversity of curatorial vision in the area of interpretation and representation.

A willingness to allow the nature of the institution to be questioned and to encourage a diversity of representation and opinion is what has the museum continue to be an exciting place for contemporary culture. Artists have felt vitally involved in the re-interpretation and 'making of culture' that is happening in contemporary museums and have actively challenged and supported museums in this period of change. They have contributed new ways of looking, of questioning and of facilitating self-reflexivity and imagination in museum audiences.

As *The Gay Museum* project showed, museums continue to be sites where different communities can make meaning about themselves. As 'makers of meaning' artists open up ideas of how meaning is constructed and presented in society. As 'makers of meaning' museums are vibrant places that can reflect cultural change and the impact of these changes on our communities and in the

world. The collaboration between artists and museums promises to open up possibilities for moving and touching people in new ways.

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Image 3-Vanessa's Case-
showing evening dress and *Buka*



Image 4- Mannequin- showing dinner
suit open at bound breasts and text on
Butch/Femme.



Image 5- showing pieces
of soap and other artefacts
displayed with an electric
shock machine.

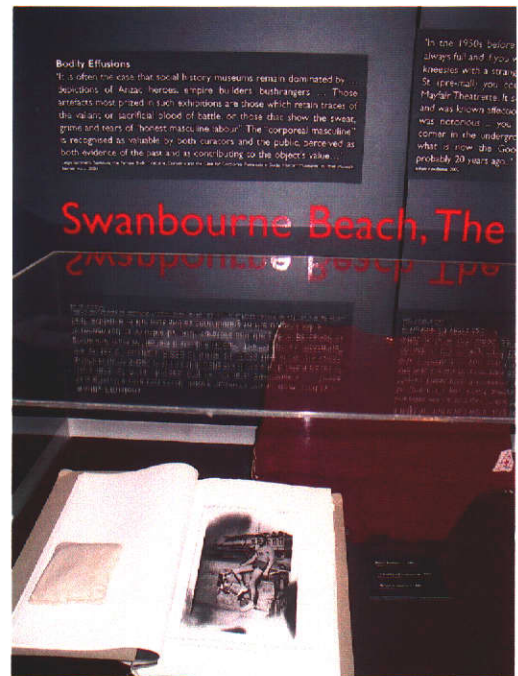


Image 6- showing 1950s bathers
in the 'beat' section, juxtaposed
with text on 'bodily effusions'.



THE GAY MUSEUM

An exhibition exploring the history of lesbian and gay presence
in Western Australia

Western Australian Museum, Perth
January 22 to March 16, 2003

Jo Darbyshire

The Gay Museum – a history of lesbian and gay presence in Western Australia

If anything the stuff of human experience is its unruliness: a resistance to containment within a glass vitrine ... Current art practice acknowledges this restlessness of meaning and many artists have made it the subject of their work. In doing so they have put considerable pressure on the paradigms that hold sway in most museums and public art galleries. Today's art actively challenges the definitions of art, artist, viewer, gallery, critic and even curator.

Lisa G. Corrin, *Give and Take Exhibition Catalogue, The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2001*

Like many people, I have always been fascinated by museums and the 'stuff' in them. I knew artists worked in museums as illustrators, designers, and prop-makers but it has only been since the mid-1980s that artists have realised they had a lot in common with curators. We both love to collect, and to make meaning using objects and ideas. When I had an opportunity to work as an artist in the museum, I realised I had a rare chance to create an exhibition that talked about history and could use strategies from contemporary visual art to do so.

The way history is presented in museums has changed considerably over the last thirty years. Empirical views of history have been challenged as society has become more diverse. As concerns were raised about access and interpretation, museums began to represent ethnic and indigenous views in their exhibitions. People now understand that the curator is no longer the 'voice of authority', and that there is no one, fixed way to understand history. The Western Australian Museum was one of the first museums to present social history exhibitions in Australia in the 1970s, and it is keen to widen the debate about how history is represented in museums. The Museum generously supported this exhibition, allowing me access to collections and freedom to explore and interpret the material.

The theme of the exhibition was chosen not only to redress the lack of representation of lesbian and gay people in West Australian history, but also because few objects had been collected by the Museum to illustrate homosexuality or to acknowledge this cultural group. On the face of it lesbian and gay people had no history. Given this absence, my challenge as an artist was to find creative solutions to talk about our history and what meaning could be made of it.

Museums have many rules and perhaps this is one of the reasons artists feel drawn to them. Questioning rules is one of our strengths. However, it is not the artist's wish to break rules for the sake of it, as many people fear. Rather, by breaking institutional conventions I saw the possibility of opening up new meanings and ideas. Traditionally, museums have tended to display objects in terms of their classification, referring to their function, provenance, or in the case of natural history specimens, their place in a taxonomic order. In this exhibition, I wanted to overcome this 'unwritten' rule by exploring other ways objects can be interpreted when displayed.

Artists bring with them training in lateral thinking and the skill of 'looking'. This looking is the ability to see how ideas might connect with material objects: to see symbolic content and possibilities for other meanings in the materiality or

aesthetic of an object. In The Gay Museum, I appropriated objects from collections of social and maritime history, anthropology and natural science and tried to use them symbolically, ironically and humorously. Objects hold memories – our memories – and especially those to do with sex and place: touch, emotion, body, transience, fantasy and love. Unlikely objects, thrown together casually or juxtaposed with text, may evoke new meanings.

Sexuality was not traditionally something museums have been comfortable talking about, unless connected to natural science discussions. Human sexuality is notoriously fluid and changeable; a person may have different needs and desires at different stages in their lives, and fall under various definitions or labels as they do so. One thing that is certain is that the idea of heterosexuality can't, by definition, exist without its binary opposite – homosexuality. The two have always been connected and, as the many definitions of sexual identity presented in this exhibition show, there have been many places to linger or hide between these two points. Homosexual activists, in their demands for sexual freedom, have perhaps acted as a catalyst for change in the 'straight' community. By reflecting on the experiences of homosexual people and their presence, I hope this exhibition encourages richer discussions about the history of sexuality in Western Australia. I believe there needs to be more effort to record and represent lesbian and gay history in our public institutions. Historian Gary Wotherspoon has said that such material has simply been suppressed in Australia. He asserts that historians have been complicit in this, and has pointed out that material has been destroyed, either by the authorities, who wished to deny that such widespread behaviour existed or by relatives and family intent on protecting their 'good name'.¹

While researching this exhibition, the gaps in knowledge, the collusion to keep quiet, the eradication of knowledge or memory, self-censorship and the fear of exposure in the lesbian and gay community were heartbreakingly apparent. For many people, safety lay in the eradication of all evidence of difference. Many things, such as photographs and artefacts, that signal significant moments in our history were just too dangerous to keep. Researcher Reece Plunkett suggests that these actions are evidence that gay and lesbian people have had a fundamentally different experience of history, and that how history is hidden or disallowed is important evidence of the experience itself. She encourages us to write about sexuality as a central element of Western Australian history, not simply to append or consider it as an after thought.²

It is with heartfelt thanks that I acknowledge those people who have spoken to me in oral histories, who shared their precious photographs, objects and private stories, and contributed to this exhibition in so many ways. These people show that our varied experience of lived sexuality, our lives as homosexual people, and our history of fighting for equality have only contributed to a richer West Australian history.

1. Garry Wotherspoon, 'Private Vice to Public history: Homosexuality in Australia', *Public History Review*, vol.1, 1992.
2. Reece Plunkett, 'History, Sexuality, Western Australia', conference paper, Homosexual Histories Conference, Melbourne, 1988.

Aboriginal visibility

In 1956 when I was about 6 I lived in Coolgardie and I loved to dress in my mother's clothes. I remember my mother saying once that if I went out into the wind dressed like that I would turn into a girl, like Christine Jorgensen. So, of course I kept running out into the wind at every opportunity hoping I'd change!

Brian Abdullah, Jennifer, 2002

An American private in the US Army, George Jorgensen made headlines in 1952 when he went to Denmark for an operation to become a woman. She came to Australia on a stage tour in 1955 as Christine Jorgensen.

When I've taken my lover back home, they've reacted to it in a very positive way, and my brothers and sisters call her *umini* which is 'sister-in-law' in *Bardi*. My family is making a land claim on our traditional land, and my brother, when talking about the project, has said to me, 'Oh, this is where we'll live – you'll live here with your woman, and we'll live here' ... so they regard it as quite normal.

Marie Andrews in the SBS television documentary, 'Double Trouble', 1991



Robert Smith, 1976

Robert Smith, Perth, c.1970

In our environment we identify as being sisters even if we don't wear drag. You know, we might have long fingernails, or we might have our eyebrows plucked but not wear drag, or not live as a woman – but still enjoy Sistergirl qualities.

Robert Smith, Vanessa, 2002

Poofter

Offensive and uniquely Australian in usage ... it has been suggested that because homosexuals were supposed to wear cosmetics, the powder-puff, a cosmetic instrument, was shortened to 'puff', which with usage was altered and 'the word became the thing'.

David Clay, *Camping Isn't Gay*, 1974

Powder Puff, c.1920-30s

Chiffon scarf with down puff in centre.
CH1980.602





Sea

The Dutch East India Company ship *Zeewijk* was wrecked on a reef of the Abrolhos islands, off the Western Australian coast in June, 1727. The survivors found their way over the reef to Gun Island. On 30th November, two boys Adriaen Spoor and Pieter Engels were found committing 'the stupid sin', which is what the Dutch called homosexual acts. What happened to the boys is recorded in the journal of Adriaen Van der Graeff:

It has appeared to us clearly and truthfully that the persons mentioned, on 30th November 1727, at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, committed in the island the abominable and god-forsaken deeds of Sodom and Gomorrah, to the great sorrow of the officers, distress of the crew, and general peril of our island. Through which deed terrible plagues may strike our people, or discord may occur among us, with the loss of all that is good. The outrageous and God-forsaken manner of living has reached such a height that the junior seamen did not fear God nor justice in committing the acts ... all of which are of a dangerous and evil nature and where justice prevails ought to be punished by death for the prevention of further evil.

'Journal of Adriaen Van der Graeff'

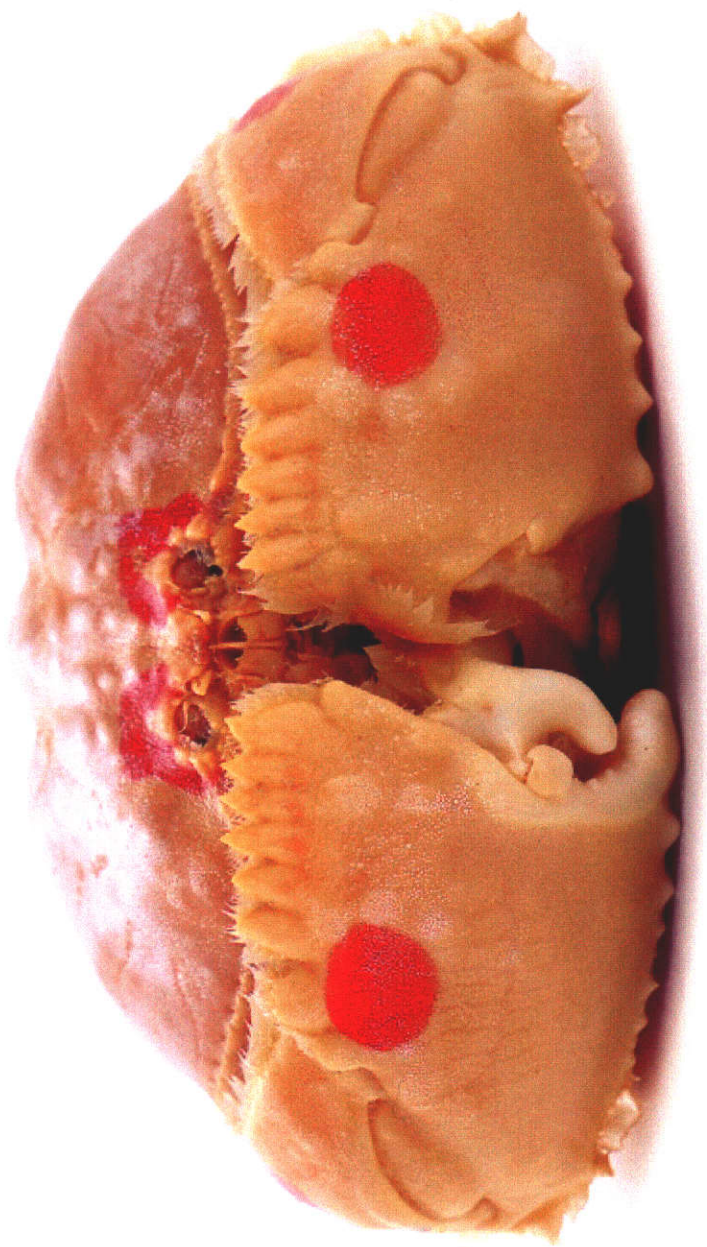
The two boys were marooned on two outer coral islands and left to die.

Sourced from Hugh Edwards, *The Wreck on the Half-Moon Reef, Rigby, Australia, 1970*

Dice

Bone, recovered from the *Zeewijk* (1727) wreck during archaeological excavations on Gun Island, Houtman Abrolhos, by the Western Australian Maritime Museum in 1978.

ZW4977



Invisibility has been both our safety and our trap

One of the great disasters, in my opinion, was when we had the meeting to dissolve CAMP, which would have been about 1988, and they decided to destroy the records. I pleaded with them ... I said, 'put them in the Battye Library. Put a 50-year embargo on them if you want to. Don't destroy them ... that's part of history!' They said it would be in the spirit of the constitution (which said all the records should be kept under lock and key) to destroy them. All the minutes and all the correspondence were destroyed...

Geoffrey Davis, 2002

A Shame-faced Crab

Calappidae, *Calappa philargius*, North West, Western Australia.
c28925, Aquatic Zoology

Being a woman and being an artist in the early decades of the 20th century opened up enormous possibilities. With opportunities for financial and domestic independence, women could break with convention, travel and entertain careers that had been previously unobtainable. Already thrown to the edges of their worlds, what would it mean to also choose to be a lesbian? Would this choice liberate or would it force exile and concealment?

Janda Gooding, Curator of Historical Art,
Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2002

Silver Locket, c.1900

CH1975.501





1950s

The men coming back from overseas after the war ... many of them had had homo-erotic adventures so they were more tolerant of gays. Poofers only started to be used in a nasty way in the late 50s – when the tide seemed to turn...

Alex Buchanan, from an oral history interview with Ivan King, 1996

We were persecuted in the 50s! A lot of people that got in awkward positions went to gaol and after they did their sentence, they left. We often wondered where they had gone and then somebody would say, 'They left town...they're in the eastern states now.'

I would never mention their names ... the point is – I can tell you about things but I don't need to incriminate people – because this is a code that we have. It's a code of silence amongst the discreet members of the homosexual community ... I am not going to give you any names. I would be banned and outed ... by my own group.

Triz, 2002

In the 1950s, before television, the cinemas were nearly always full, and if you were lucky, you found yourself playing kneesies with a stranger in the Metro ... and while in Hay St, pre-mall, you could always pop downstairs to the Mayfair Theatre. It screened hourly newsreel programs and was known affectionately as 'the Hope and Grope'. It was notorious ... You could also have sex around the corner in the underground toilet on Murray St – near what is now the Good Samaritans – it was filled in probably 20 years ago...

Johan Knollema, 2002



Drag

WE CAN DO WITHOUT 'DRAG' PARTIES

As parties go it was lively enough. There was beer and music and dancing. Heavily made-up blondes and brunettes gossiped on the sidelines. They giggled and archly dug each other in the ribs. Occasionally they danced together.

A newcomer could have sworn that some of the girls were even flirting with each other. What sort of a set-up was it anyway? Now supposing you had a dance card and you went up and rubbed it gently against the chin of one of the girls. It would have rasped like sandpaper. Supposing you put a hand on a nyloned limb! You would have felt bristles and a muscular calf. Supposing you'd got playful and pulled at a lock of the blonde hair ... the whole head of hair would have come away in your hands. In other words you'd have got the idea pretty fast that the femmes were phoney and you were in the company of an extraordinary gathering of make believe madams.

This could have been your astounding experience had you been invited to a recent 'social evening' in a suburb of Perth. All the guests were men and many of them wore 'full drag'. It was one of THOSE nights. And in case you're not *au fait* with the jargon of the effeminates, 'drag' means: Elaborate wig, Painted and rouged face, Expensive frock and dainty underwear, Brassiere with padding, Silk stockings and high-heeled shoes.

Party was lavish and crowded. There was plenty of hard liquor and hot jazz ... and so 'drag nights' have come to Perth! We've been mercifully free of anything like this even though they've been commonplace in the bigger cities' for some years. Regrettable feature is that many of the cultists are seemingly intelligent people and some of them hold responsible jobs. What the 'evenings' develop into is something that can only be guessed at...

Front page of *The Mirror*, 24 October, 1953

Everybody knew what the laws were in the sixties. As drag queens, we were allowed to get around in drag ... so long as you wore male underwear. Otherwise you could be arrested and charged with Gross Indecency.

Robert Smith, *Vanessa*, 2002



Change

Dr Csillag believes that since homosexuality is learnt it can be unlearned ... He sat a homosexual in a chair with a wet electrode tied to his leg. As he screened slides of nude homosexuals, he played a tape-recording of erotic homosexual literature and then he gave the man an electric shock. The recorder then stopped playing and the slide was replaced by one of a provocatively-dressed woman. Relief from tension became associated strongly with the female body, while the male body was associated with anxiety ... Dr Csillag tried the shock on himself once. 'I swore like hell', he said.

Tony Thomas, 'Homosexuals and Perth', *The Critic, the University of Western Australia*, vol.8, no.10, 1968, p.94.

It was about 1976 ... I was coming back from doing a clinic one day down at Wattie Creek or Dagaragu and all the kids in the back of the four-wheel drive started screaming about this Walkabout Shop. As we got closer, I could see a funny little truck parked out in the middle of the paddock. It turned out to be this bunch of women from Kununurra driving around the Aboriginal settlements and Main Roads camps. Wherever there were people in the bush, they would stop and open up the truck ...

They were the friendliest women I had ever met and they all looked like lesbians to me. When I say they looked like lesbians ... I mean there was something straight away – an instant, friendly air of confidence about them...

Bronwyn Wallace, 2002

I was transferred back to HMAS *Stirling* on Garden Island, and put on a year's probation. Every month I had to go to my commanding officer and he would ask, 'Have you slept with any woman this month Rachel?', and I would have to tell him, 'No'.

There were loud whispers going around that the laws were going to be changed and so basically I just hung in there, and in 1992 they finally banned discrimination against homosexuals in the Defence Forces ...

But I still had to go and have my monthly reports with my commanding officer and on the next one he said, 'Rachel, have you slept with any women this month?' I said, 'Yes, sir,' and he goes, 'Good on you, Rachel!'

Rachel Standing, 2002



AIDS

A lot of the beautiful young men who worked at Connections in the late 70s and 80s are dead, many of them died of AIDS ... every night Tim or I light a candle and some incense sticks in the red 'shrine' set up at the top of the club – in memory of them. I only have to look down and I can see a spot where a group of particular men once stood. I can remember their faces and there's so many that have disappeared.

Peter Robinson, 2002

BAN GAYS NOT GUNS

'Outlawing homosexuality would save more lives than proposed gun laws', outspoken MP Wilson Tuckey told a gun rally yesterday ... Mr Tuckey's attack on homosexuality and his reference to the Port Arthur tragedy drew applause from the male-dominated gun rally ... 'There is another disease which kills about 550 Australians every year, at least 30 more than are killed by guns. That is HIV-AIDS. Legislation to outlaw anal intercourse, if it received 100 percent compliance, which like guns it will not, would directly reduce HIV-AIDS by about 95 per cent ... It just depends what kind of weapon you want to use to kill someone.'

Bruce Butler, *The Sunday Times*, 2 July 1996, p3.

WOMEN'S NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
PERMANENT PERKS & EVENING
HOSPITAL FRIENDS SUNDAY
CAMPAL 7:30 PM
MEET DAILY BY 22456
PHONE 22456
PERMANENT PERKS & EVENING
PERMANENT PERKS & EVENING

OLDEN K...
 01.50 weekly
 11.50 weekly
 11.50 weekly

3072
 200A
 200A
 200A

How the West was Won

The State election held in December 1996 set the scene for an interesting battle. The conservative Liberal Government of Richard Court was returned to power for a second term. However, for the first time in 126 years conservatives did not hold the majority in the Legislative Council. Instead new members from the Australian Democrats and the WA Greens held the balance of power. Green MLC, Giz Watson, was the first open lesbian elected to any Australian parliament. More importantly, this was the first time ever in Western Australia's entire history, that progressive parties held the majority in both Houses of Parliament. The scene was set for reform.

Damian Meyers, 'How the west was won: a personal analysis of the law reform campaign in Western Australia', *word is out e-Journal*, 2002

State MLC **Giz Watson** and long-time **CAMP Inc.** campaigner **Geoffrey Davis**

On 26 February 2002, the night State Parliament passed Gay and Lesbian law reform.

Photo: Jo Darbyshire



'Normalcy', it is said, 'is the evil side of homosexuality' ... Normalization is the battleground of queer political struggle ... queer disdains and defies the coherence and stability of all sexual identity. That to me is the meaning of queer, and it is a meaning we need now, in all its historical richness, to counter ... the normalization of sexuality.

Douglas Crimp citing Marc Siegal in 'Getting the Warhol We Deserve: Cultural Studies and Queer Culture', *International Journal of Contemporary Art*, vol.1, pt.2, 1999, pp.164-165.

Personal Ads, *The Sunday Times*, September 30 1973

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Unless otherwise referenced, all quotes in this catalogue are taken from oral history interviews conducted between the person named and Jo Darbyshire in 2002. Transcripts and tapes from these oral histories are available at the Gay and Lesbian Archives of Western Australia. Thanks to oral history participants: Robert Vanessa Smith, Triz, Bronwyn Wallace, Rachel Standing, Ray Currell, Geoffrey Davis and Vic Francis for sharing their stories. The quotes from Janda Gooding, Johan Knollema and Peter Robinson are from personal interviews and correspondence with Jo Darbyshire in 2002.

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Cover image: Mussel specimens

Survivor, 2002

Veneridae, *Paphia crassisulca* (Lamarck, 1818)

Scratch 'n win game ticket with

Veneridae, *Callista impar* (Lamarck, 1818)

photo of Sciona Browne.

S14103, S14094, Aquatic Zoology

