



UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA

27 June 2014

Mr Rupert Myer AO,
Chair of the Australia Council
PO Box 788
Strawberry Hills NSW 2012

Dear Rupert Myer AO

Out of frame: University art museums and the snapshot of contemporary visual arts 2013–14

Please find attached a response to the Australia Council's 'Talking Points' report on behalf of the University Art Museums of Australia (UAMA) group. Whilst the university art museums sector is large and diverse, the submission is the result of discussion between members of UAMA comprising:

- Malcom Bywaters, Academy Gallery & NEW Gallery, University of Tasmania
- Erica Green, Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia
- Anita Angel, Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Art Gallery
- Leanne Willis, Deakin University Art Gallery
- Fiona Salmon, Flinders University Art Museum
- Kelly Gellatly, Ian Potter Museum, University of Melbourne
- Chris Malcolm, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University
- Michael Brennan, La Trobe University Museum of Art
- Ted Snell AM, CitWA, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia
- Charlotte Day, Monash University Museum of Art
- Felicity Fenner, UNSW Galleries, COFA, University of NSW
- Vanessa Van Ooyen, QUT Art Museum & William Robinson Gallery, Queensland University of Technology
- Ann Stephen, University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney
- Campbell Gray, University of Queensland Art Museum
- Tania Creighton, UTS Gallery, University of Technology Sydney

The submission was facilitated by Dr Chris McAuliffe, former Director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art.

We look forward to your response in due course.

Yours sincerely

Dr Malcom Bywaters
2014 Chair: University Art Museums Australia

cc Mr Tony Grybowski, CEO, Australia Council
Ms Julie Lomax, Director Visual Arts, Australia Council



UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA

RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL'S 'TALKING POINTS' REPORT, JUNE 2014

Out of frame: University art museums and the snapshot of contemporary visual arts 2013–14

University art museums and galleries in Australia

The most recent national data on museums estimated a total of 165 public art museums and galleries in Australia.¹ In 2014, 45+ university-based art museums and galleries are operated by 29 universities, across all states and territories. University art museums (UAMs) therefore represent 27% of all public art museums and galleries nationally.

University Art Museums Australia (UAMA) represents art museums and galleries based at, and resourced by Australian universities. While national data are not available, a 2009 analysis of eight of the major UAMs, in five states, showed:

- Annual operating expenditure in excess of \$7.5 million
- Management of art collections (primarily Australian) valued in excess of \$134 million
- Annual acquisition of contemporary Australian in excess of \$2 million
- Annual visitation of over 150,000

These figures represent only a fraction of all Australian UAM activity and as such are the tip of the proverbial iceberg.²

In 2013, for example, Australian UAMs delivered *at least* 410 exhibitions, the majority of them of contemporary art.

The activities of UAMs are all the more important in smaller states (where they represent the second tier, after state galleries) or in regional centres (where their programming takes on the role of urban ARIs and contemporary art spaces).

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Museums, Australia, 2007-08* (cat. no. 8560.0).

² UAMs studied in the report were: The Ian Potter Museum of Art (The University of Melbourne, Melbourne); Ivan Dougherty Gallery (The University of New South Wales, Sydney); John Curtin Gallery (Curtin University of Technology, Perth); Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery (The University of Western Australia, Perth); Monash University Museum of Art (Monash University, Melbourne); QUT Art Museum (Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane); Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art (University of South Australia, Adelaide); The University of Queensland Art Museum (The University of Queensland, Brisbane).

Modelling the Australian art ecology

The model of the Australian art ecology 2013–14 in *Talking points* all but excludes the substantial local, national and international activity of UAMs. In the absence of substantial consultation with UAM staff, this submission offers observations which may redress the oversight.

Talking points correctly notes that contemporary art is a complex and dynamic cultural sector, operating without any master plan. While the nature or necessity of a master plan are issues for debate, there is no denying the need for a workable map of the 'Australian art ecology'. UAMA suggests that UAMs are pivotal sites in this ecology.

Likewise, UAMA endorses the suggestion that professional pathways, sector capacity, resourcing models, sustainability, responsiveness and partnerships must all be understood in their present and potential states. Operating within the university sector—a stable and sustainable international ecology combining commitment to experiment, education and civic engagement—UAMs have developed strategies responding to the professional and structural challenges identified in *Talking points*.

Talking points models a professional pathway proceeding from ARI, through contemporary art space, to commercial galleries and state art museums. While the report does not position UAMs on that pathway, a more robust model would recognise that:

- With one, if not two, tertiary degrees becoming the standard qualification of emerging artists, the university system is 'ground zero' for contemporary art;
- Significant numbers of artists will have their first exhibition in a university-based gallery;
- UAMs offer many artists their first experience of a fully-resourced exhibition, incorporating artist fees, catalogue, media promotions, educational and public programs;
- UAMs support major commissions, public art and festival-related art projects, often in partnership with communities and local government;
- UAM exhibitions are career milestones for artists, serving as a bridge into major art events and state museums. Of the 24 artists in the 2014 Adelaide Biennial, 18 had previously had solo exhibitions in UAMs. Sixteen had been included in a total of 97 UAM group exhibitions;
- Mid-career artists are consistently served by UAMs, especially through survey exhibitions. Many artists will receive their first survey exhibition at a UAM.

UAMs offer contemporary artists a flexible and robust platform at key stages in their careers. In addition, a fully-rounded map of the art ecology would also recognise a range of collateral contributions UAMs make to professional development, audience engagement and resourcing within contemporary art:

- UAMs are a prominent training ground for emerging curators, writers and arts administrators. They are also a platform for many independent curators' projects;

- UAMs employ significant numbers of artists in back-of-house and exhibition installation roles. Artists often parlay this into freelance work on a small business scale;
- UAMs support extensive audience engagement activities, often amplified by the substantial 'reach' of universities into education, media, alumni and online networks;
- UAMs formally integrate engagement with contemporary art into sophisticated, inter-disciplinary tertiary teaching programs;
- UAM staff consistently contribute to sector development as members of committees and boards, policy advisors, authors, judges and commentators;
- High-level partnerships with local government, NGOs, philanthropic trusts and corporations are also common;
- UAMs are frequently the broker or auspicing body offering emerging and mid-career artists their first access to corporate sponsorship, philanthropic grants and major project funding.

Strategic opportunities

In addition to understanding the scale and impact of UAM operations, it is important to recognise the contribution UAMs can make to the strategic issues raised in *Talking points*. As an extensive, national network of art museums and galleries, operating with shared values and within a collegial framework, UAMs offer consistency of purpose. Such a network can deliver critical mass to a sector without a master plan. Committed to experimentation, education, rigorous professional practice and civic outreach, UAMs foster art, mentor artists and engage with audiences at the critical 'early encounter' stages of the art ecology.

1. A mobile, non-linear art ecology

In all of its activities, a UAM moves fluidly across diverse fields: education, research, exhibitions, publishing, engagement, national and international partnerships, social and cultural policy. What this suggests is that the more linear pathways implied in *Talking points*—from ARI to biennale, from studio to white cube, from obscurity to recognition—should be tempered with a sense vertical and lateral mobility. What UAMs demonstrate—in speaking to medicine students one moment and a philanthropic trust the next, in working with an emerging artist one moment and an independent curator from Singapore the next—is both responsive, organisational flexibility and the capacity to productively navigate institutional and professional hierarchies.

With a greater critical mass than the ARI or contemporary space, and far more nimble operations than a state-operated museum, the UAM is well-positioned to combine mobility and formality (rather than seeing these as mutually exclusive terms).

2. A culture of experimentation

The culture of universities appears paradoxical; they are institutions dedicated to a tradition of experimentation. But it is this formalisation of experimentation—a tradition

of breaking rules while exploring new ones—that offers strategic opportunities for a contemporary art sector seeking to pursue risk and achieve sustainability while holding ‘spectacularisation’ at bay.

An alternative to a contemporary art master plan may lie in reflection on existing strategies. Universities and UAMs, for example, have been in the business of shepherding ideas from the cutting-edge into the mainstream for decades. The fact that the pre-history of today’s ARIs and contemporary spaces lies in university-based galleries—such as the George Paton Gallery and Tin Sheds—is evidence of longevity and impact of this culture.

UAMs are a working model of the laboratory or ‘ideas factory’ in which experimentation is endorsed and resourced, not only materially but conceptually, through the participation of artists, students and academics in a dynamic, internationalised culture of inquiry and reflection.

3. Brokering resources

In material terms, UAMs offer a model for achieving sustainable resources within a complex and competitive funding environment. Significantly, UAMs indicate that ‘public/private/corporate’ model of resourcing is too rigidly conceived.

UAMs are not publically funded; typically, less than one-third of a university’s resources are state-sourced and cultural activities are funded from within a university’s self-generated revenue. A distinctive characteristic of UAM resourcing is the high level of leveraging involved, a factor of significant to small-to-medium arts organisations in general.

While UAMs must work hard for project resources, essential operations are often ‘silently’ underwritten by drawing on consolidated services of a large ‘parent’ organisation. UAMs have access to maintenance, OHS, risk management, HR, financial management, IT and media services far beyond the scale of other medium-sized art organisations. An art ecology pursuing rigorous professional practice but concerned at duplication and operational costs could learn much from this.

Likewise, UAMs and university-based arts agencies, such as Asialink, are able to broker major resourcing and pursue ambitious projects through partnerships with philanthropic trusts, corporate and government agencies. These are propelled in part by the scale, reach and reputation of the host university.

4. Shape-shifting

The distinctive university context—a respected forum for risk-taking—allows the UAM to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders (whose interests may seem incompatible). As opposed to a linear or ‘step ladder’ model of the art ecology, UAMs are able to ‘shape shift’ in ways that merge the spirit and activities of the ARI/contemporary space with the reach and stable structure of a major institution. Artists see a gallery with the operational weight that makes risky, ambitious projects achievable. Corporate, government and philanthropic partners are more inclined to see the value of

experiment and internationalisation through the lens of the university; they see an effective balance of experimentation, robust management and global reputation.

5. Direct action on systemic challenges

More specifically, UAMs offer direct solutions to challenges identified in *Talking points*. The plight of the mid-career artist has been systematically addressed by UAMs, with substantial, fully-serviced survey exhibitions being a staple of annual programming.

Mature artists find in the university context the mix of reflection and experimentation that allows them to become historical without abandoning cutting edge practices. It has been too easy to underestimate the survey exhibition. In supporting mid-career artists, the UAM is essentially doing what an ARI cannot do and what state galleries will not.

The frequent complaint at the paucity of critical discourse on contemporary art is addressed by UAMs in extensive publishing, public program and education programs. UAMs draw on the university community to generate sophisticated academic commentary on contemporary art, as well as forums and symposia. Increasingly, UAMs are adopting a simple, direct response to the challenge of engagement; the art museum is part of the university curriculum, across disciplines such as medicine, science, economics and the humanities.

Conclusion

Talking points makes only tentative reference to the activities and capacity of UAMs in Australia; it is suggested that UAMs 'could fuel ventures' (p 11). In this submission, UAMA suggests that there is nothing conditional about UAM capacity; it is a fact that UAMs drive a substantial proportion of contemporary arts activity.

In addition, the UAM sector is an important resource in relation to strategy and sustainability. Most UAMS have been operating since the early 1970s. Over more than four decades, UAMs have successfully navigated many of the challenges identified in *Talking points*—internationalisation, resourcing, professionalization, radically changing arts practices and new audience behaviours. Most significantly, UAMs have done so as a civic-minded participant in the contemporary art ecology, acting a facilitator, mentor, educator and broker on behalf of artists and audience alike.

Recommendation

Given the very limited recognition of the history and capacity of UAMs in *Talking points*, UAMA invites the Australia Council to open a sustained dialogue with an organisation that is a key national supporter of Australian contemporary art.