

AUSTRALIA-PACIFIC FRIENDS OF MUSEUMS FRI 8 SEPT.

WHEN I STARTED IN THIS ECCENTRIC AND ARCAINE BUSINESS OF THE ART MUSEUM, A LONG TIME AGO, AT THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM IN LONDON THE GENERAL PUBLIC, THE VISITORS, WERE OF ABSOLUTELY NO INTEREST TO US AT ALL.....IN FACT THEY WERE GENERALLY REGARDED AS A BIT OF NUISANCE....THE ART MUSEUM WAS SEEN ALMOST AS THE PRIVATE RESERVE OF THE CURATORS AND THE WORKS OF ART IN THEIR CHARGE SHOULD UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES BE SULLIED IN THE PRESENCE OF THE GENERAL RIFF-RAFF WHO, THEY HTOUGHT, WOULD NOT APPRECIATE SUCH REFINEMENTS. AND I HAVE TO SAY THAT WHEN I ARRIVED HERE, IN 1979, I FOUND A LEGACY OF THAT ATTITUDE...TO MY SURPRISE AND MY I HAVE TO SAY DISPLEASURE..

IN THOSE DAYS WE IN THE ART MUSEUMS WERE CONCERNED WERE FOCUSED MORE OR LESS ENTIRELY ON THE ART IN OUR CHARGE. WE SPENT OUR DAYS RESEARCHING, FIDDLING WITH THE DISPLAYS, WRITING LONG LABLES AND DESCRIPTIVE REPORTS, PUBLISHING IF WE COULD, GENERALLY LOOKING AFTER THE WORKS WITH ASSIDUOUS ATTENTION....AND THEN DOING ALL THOSE OTHER THINGS THAT EMERGING CURATORS DID – SMOKING, DRINKING, CANOODLING – AND HOLDING THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN COMPLETE DISDAIN.

IN THAT KIND OF CLIMATE IT IS LITTLE WONDER THAT THE IDEA OF A “FRIENDS” GROUP WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY UNTHINKABLE – AND IT WAS.

HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED – IN FOUR DECADES OUR ATTITUDES, VALUES, RESPONSIBILITES, COMMITMENTS AND ASSOCIATIONS HAVE CHANGED DRAMATICALLY...WE ARE ALL, NOW, VERY VERY INTERSTED IN OUR PUBLIC, OUR AUDIENCES AND HOW THEY CAN CONTRIBUTE TO OUR CIRCUMSTANCES AND OUR PERCEIVED ‘SUCCESS’ ....FOR BETTER OF WORSE OUR SUCCESS IS NOW VERY MUCH MEASURED IN LEVELS OF PUBLIC INTEREST AND PUBLIC SUPPORT.

THERE HAS, IN A SIMILAR SPAN OF TIME, BEEN ANOTHER CRUCIAL CHANGE IN THE TYPICAL, ESPECIALLY EUROPEAN AND AUSTRALIAN, ART MUSEUMS’ CIRCUMSTANCES. MY OLD INSTITUTION, THE V&A IS NOW HELD ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PUBLIC PURSE IN A WAY THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNTHINKABLE AS RECENTLY AS THE 1970’S, JUST AS WE ARE AT THE ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, AND OUR COLLEAGUE INSTITUTIONS LIKE THE NGV – WE NOW HAVE TO RAISE FUNDS ON OUR OWN WIT AND INITIATIVE TO ENSURE WE MAINTAIN THE GALLERY’S FUNDAMENTAL PROGRAMMES- LIKE EXHIBITIONS, PUBLICATIONS, ACQUISITIONS. THE NEED FOR ALL OUR INSTITUTIONS TO RAISE FUNDS FROM SOURCES **OUTSIDE** GOVERNMENT IS NOW *DE RIGEUR*, BUT WOULD HAVE BEEN MOST UNUSUAL FOR MOST OF US JUST 30 YEARS AGO.

THIS GALLERY, 25 YEARS AGO, RELIED ON GOVERNMENT FOR ABOUT 85% OF ITS OVERALL INCOME WHETHER IN ACTUAL CASH OR IN KIND, AND TODAY THAT FIGURE IS LESS THAN 50%.

SO OUR CIRCUMSTANCES HAVE CHANGED – SO TOO HAS OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS OUR PUBLIC...IN FACT WE TAKE AN INTEREST NOT ONLY IN OUR VISITING PUBLIC BUT ALSO IN THE PUBLIC THAT DOES NOT, AS YET VISIT US – AND THE REASON FOR THAT IS SIMPLY THAT OUR SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO THE COMMUNITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE COMMUNITY IS NOW SO VERY MUCH GREATER AND DEFINED. IN A WAY IT IS A PARADOX THAT OUR SENSE OF ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE COMMUNITY IS NOW MUCH GREATER EVEN THOUGH OUR RELIANCE ON GOVERNMENT, IE PUBLIC, FUNDING IS MUCH LESS. AND OF COURSE THIS IS WHERE THE ‘FRIENDS’ COME IN – BECAUSE ‘FRIENDS’ ATTACHED TO AND SUPPORTING AN ART MUSEUM SUCH AS THIS DO TWO ABSOLUTELY DEFINABLE AND CRUCIAL THINGS – AMONG MANY OTHERS OF COURSE.

FIRSTLY, FRIENDS ARE THE GREAT AND TANGIBLE EXPRESSION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR AND INTEREST IN THE INSTITUTION. AND SECONDLY, THEIR ACTIVITIES RAISE PUBLIC AWARENESS, PUBLIC INTEREST AND THEY RAISE FUNDS.

THAT FIRST MATTER – THE EXPRESSION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT AND INTEREST – WHAT DOES THAT ACHIEVE? TWO THINGS ABOVE ALL – ONE IT PROVIDES THE INSTITUTION – AND ALL ITS PARTS AND CONSTITUENTS MOST PARTICULARLY THE STAFF BUT ALSO BOARDS SUCH AS OUR TRUSTEES, AND FUNDING BODIES SUCH AS GOVERNMENTS AND MINISTRIES, AND NOW CORPORATE SPONSORS – WITH A BELIEF IN WHAT THEY ARE DOING. SUCH DEMONSTRABLE SUPPORT UNDERWRITES AND RE-AFFIRMS THE CREDIBILITY OF THE GALLERY AND ITS PROGRAMMES. I, FOR EXAMPLE, COULD NOT OVERESTIMATE THE SIGNIFICANCE THAT THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE ART GALLERY SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES – SOME 33,000 SOULS, CAN HAVE IN IMPRESSING OUR SO-CALLED POLITICAL MASTERS. OUR BOARD OF TRUSTEES, AS JUDITH KNOWS, REMAINS IN VERITABLE AWE OF SUCH A POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE DEMONSTRATION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT AND INTEREST. THAT LEVEL OF DEMONSTRABLE SUPPORT AND ASSOCIATION, AND THE WILL THAT SUCH MEMBERSHIP REPRESENTS, REALLY DOES IMPRESS PEOPLE.

SECONDLY THAT DEMONSTRATION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT IS THE GREATEST AND MOST EFFECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS MACHINE A PUBLIC ART MUSEUM SUCH AS THIS COULD POSSIBLY HAVE. IT IS AKIN TO THE EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE – LET’S TAKE THE CURRENT GIACOMETTI SHOW FOR EXAMPLE (OR AS SOME WOULD SAY THAT GREAT IRISH SCULPTOR – JACK O’METTI] – WE COULD SPEND A FORTUNE ADVERTISING IT – BUT WE’RE NOT ‘COS WE CAN’T AFFORD TO DO SO – SO WHAT HAPPENS? WE RELY ON THAT MOST EFFECTIVE AND VERY INEXPENSIVE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION –

‘WORD OF MOUTH’. SIMPLY ALL THE PEOPLE COMING TO THAT SHOW ARE TELLING EVERYBODY TO COME AND SEE IT FOR THEMSELVES – THERE IS NO MORE CREDIBLE AND PERSUASIVE VOICE THAN THE PUBLIC – AS POLITICIANS KNOW. PUBLIC OPINION HAS REAL CREDIBILITY AND AUTHORITY – ESPECIALLY WHEN IT’S AN OPINION WE WANT TO HEAR. BUT THE MEMBERS OF THE ART GALLERY SOCIETY ARE OUR GREATEST AND MOST CONVINCING AMBASSADORS.

TO THE SECOND POINT – ESSENTIALLY THE PROPAGATION OF THE FAITH OF ART. AS WE MOVE FROM BEING THE PASSIVE INSTITUTION WE ONCE WERE – A PLACE THAT JUST HUNG A FEW PICTURES ON THE WALLS AND OPENED THE DOORS AND HOPED FOR THE BEST; AND NOT TOO MANY PEOPLE – TO THE PLACE OF ACTIVITY, CHANGE AND RESPONSIVE TO PUBLIC INTEREST WE ARE CERTAINLY NO LONGER THE PASSIVE PLACE. WE ARE OVERT IN OUR QUEST TO ATTRACT – AND WE ARE ALSO FULLY AWARE OF THE MEANS TO ATTRACT. WHILST WE ARE STILL, ULTIMATELY, A PLACE TO LOOK AT WORKS OF ART, THE AURA OF FACILITIES AND SIDE ATTRACTIONS AND SERVICES THAT PEOPLE NOW EXPECT, WE HAVE MOVED INTO A HIGHLY PRO-ACTIVE STATE. THE VANGUARD OF THAT IMAGE IS ONCE AGAIN PROVIDED, ESSENTIALLY, NOT BY THE CORE STAFF WHICH IS STILL PRINCIPALLY DEVOTED TO THE MAINTENANCE OF THE INSTITUTION, BUT TO THE FRIENDS – THAT SUPPORT GROUP INSPIRED BY A WILLING ASSOCIATION WITH THE GALLERY.

OF COURSE MANY LIKE ART GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS DO ALL THAT THEMSELVES, BUT MOST OF US DO NOT REALLY HAVE THE RESOURCES TO HANDLE ALL THOSE EVENTS WHICH BRING SUCH DYNAMIC TO THE HEART AND THE APPEARANCE OF THE GALLERY. THIS IS A FANTASTIC ROLE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCH FRIENDS’ GROUPS....THE ENERGY AND SPONTANEITY THAT DRIVES ALL THESE EVENTS – FROM LECTURES, PARTIES, VISITS, FILM SHOWS, WORKSHOPS, CONCERTS – A RANGE THAT SEEMS TO EXPAND BOTH IN NUMBER AND EMBRACE – WITNESS THE SOCIETY’S FANTASTICALLY POPULAR AND VISIONARY LECTURE SERIES OF FAITHS, CIVILIZATIONS AND PHILOSOPHIES – SUCH THINGS EXTEND THE TRADITIONAL ART MUSEUM INTO THE ASSOCIATED WORLDS OF THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE.....SUCH INITIATIVES I WOULD CONTEND COULD NEVER HAVE COME OUT OF THE TRADITIONAL ART MUSEUM NOR INDEED THE TRADITIONAL STAFF OF THE ART MUSEUM – SUCH INITIATIVES COULD ONLY COME FROM A SEMI-AUTONOMOUS BODY DEVOTED TO THE GALLERY AND TO ITS EXPLORATION OF AND EXTENSION INTO THE COMMUNITY. THAT IS JUST ONE REASON WHY I WOULD FIGHT FOR THE AUTONOMY OF OUR FRIENDS – A PARALLEL FORCE IN PERFECT HARMONY – AND A GENUINE ALMOST SPONTANEOUS EXPRESSION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT AND BELIEF.