

Leaving Home: The role of touring exhibitions for University Art Museums

University art museums have the distinct advantage of being able to engage with the wider public in ways that academic departments cannot. They act as a comfortable initial entry point for visitors who may perceive universities as insular and non-inclusive. They are able to present university research and areas of interest and importance in a manner that is less academic and more “user friendly”. They are also custodians of important cultural collections that belong to and should be shared with the university community and the wider public. However, for many university art museums these aims are restricted by resources and facilities. Many museums are located within the university’s campus grounds making access difficult for visitors. Many are also small in size (often with only a single-spaced gallery) limiting the scope and size of exhibitions. In addition, many art museums are faced with diminishing funding but increased expectations. The challenge for these university art museums is how best to reach a wider audience and how best to make available exhibitions that are just as valid and exciting as those shown in larger spaces. Touring exhibitions in part address these challenges. They offer smaller sized spaces the opportunity to widen their audience, engage with the community and mount more comprehensive projects. Furthermore, they can play an integral role in the university reaching its aims and objectives. In this paper I wish to present the experience of La Trobe University Art Museum’s commitment to hosting annual external exhibitions; a combination of local and regional touring initiatives. This commitment has seen an increase in our profile, improved visitor numbers to our exhibitions and has aligned us with wider university aims, most notably community engagement.

La Trobe University has a strong tradition of being committed to the arts. An art collection was included as part of the Bundoora campus' initial master-plan and was begun prior to any capital works proceeding, while public sculptures were commissioned in order to provide a cultural environment for students and staff alike. In recent years the University has continued and extended this commitment beyond its main campus at Bundoora in Melbourne's north. As part of the Art Museum's annual exhibition program a minimum of four exhibitions are curated for external venues – two at a local art space and a further two for venues in regional Victoria. This initiative is supported by the University as it forms part of its overall strategic plan for community engagement. It promotes the University's art collection, its commitment to the arts, and research conducted by university staff. Moreover, it allows the public to engage with University projects without the need to navigate around a campus to find the correct building. These projects enable collaboration between the Art Museum and academic departments opening up the possibility for concurrent symposiums, colloquiums and lectures (the Art Museum is not aligned with a Faculty, rather it is part of Central Administration). Therefore, our touring initiatives meet several University wide key objectives – engagement with a wider and varied audience (which equates to potential students), promotion of the University brand and promotion of the University's core aims of teaching, learning and research.

I want to present three examples of past external exhibitions that demonstrate what has been achieved to date before focussing on a future more ambitious initiative, which builds on the past to increase the University's profile and more closely align the Art Museum with academic departments across the University.

As previously mentioned we currently curate a minimum of four external exhibitions per year – two of which are presented at a local council run art centre (which is within two kilometres of the University’s main campus). This venue provides certain facilities and exposure which the campus Art Museum cannot. Firstly, it is a multi-room venue allowing more comprehensive exhibitions. The layout enables the presentation of sub themes within defined spaces; presenting clearer exhibition narratives and increasing audience understanding and enjoyment. Secondly, the venue is open on weekends. Due to the location of the University Art Museum within the campus it is not viable for it to be opened beyond weekdays. Curating exhibitions for a local venue with extended hours gives us greater access to our local audience as well as visitors from the wider community. An example of the success of this program is a recent exhibition titled *Common Ground*. This exhibition, which focussed on the exchange and mutual influence between Australian indigenous and non-indigenous artists, was visited by in excess of 1200 people in a five week period. It received extensive press coverage, radio coverage and listings on a vast array of websites. The exhibition was promoted as “a La Trobe University Art Museum Exhibition” and various forms of advertising highlighted that the works were drawn primarily from the La Trobe University Art Collection. These two references, along with the exposure of the University’s logo continually reinforced the University’s brand, art collection, research output and involvement in the arts. Furthermore, it emphasized the significant role that the University plays in the local area.

The following examples are of two exhibitions that were curated for regional centres. La Trobe University is recognised as a State leader in regional education, having six campuses throughout Victoria. The University Art Museum aims to curate exhibitions

that tour to these areas, hosted by the region's main art gallery. The reasons for such an approach are multi-dimensional. In the first instance these exhibitions offer benefits which parallel the ones discussed previously: availability of a greater space, longer opening hours, ease of access for visitors and greater visitor numbers. Furthermore, the exhibitions not only engage with the local community but they reinforce the philosophy of the University playing an integral role in their communities. The exhibitions also stress the idea of the University's art collection being the community's art collection. Two successful examples are the 2005 initiatives *My Country: Abstract Interpretations of the Australian Landscape*, held at the Bendigo Art Gallery – the major regional gallery in Victoria (150 km north of Melbourne) and *Bernard Boles: Surrealism and Beyond*, which was held at the Mildura Arts Centre (540km north of Melbourne). In a four week period the former exhibition attracted 3,300 visitors and received extensive local press coverage, including front cover exposure and a double page article in the arts section of the region's largest newspaper. Again branded as a La Trobe University Art Museum exhibition, such exposure reinforced the University's commitment to the region while also presenting an opportunity for people to access the University's Art Collection in a truly public domain. The latter exhibition, *Bernard Boles: Surrealism and Beyond*, attracted 2,100 visitors in a six week period. It also received wide-spread media coverage and was accompanied by a three day education program for local schools. As part of the exhibition the curator also presented a one hour lecture to visual arts students at the University's local campus. The University's key objectives – community engagement, teaching, learning and research – were all met with this exhibition in a six week period. The local community received a major exhibition showcasing the work of a forgotten but important Australian artist. The

University's visual arts students received a lecture introducing the artist and his work. Local primary and secondary school students (which equates to potential students) were able to engage with the works in the space in addition to having access to the curator for an hour. And finally, the continuing research conducted on the artist and the collection of works he bequeathed to the University was presented visually in the exhibition, aurally in the lecture and verbally in the catalogue.

Building upon the current format the La Trobe University Art Museum will continue to curate four external exhibitions per year as well as planning major national and international touring initiatives. I want to briefly turn to one of these future projects, an international exhibition and symposium between La Trobe University and Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. Next year La Trobe University Art Museum will tour the exhibition *My Country: Abstract Interpretations of the Australian Landscape* to the Art Museum at Ateneo. As part of the exhibition a delegate of scholars will also travel to the Philippines to conduct a week-long colloquium and a series of formal lectures. The academic component of this project will address themes identified in the exhibition and is being prepared not by the Art History Program – as is probably expected - but rather by the Department of Social Sciences and the Philippines Australia Studies Centre.

However, the scholars will be drawn from various fields enabling a cross-discipline approach to the week-long program, reinforcing the collaborative nature of the project and the high importance still placed on critical thinking in universities. This project has elevated the profile of the Art Museum and its role within the University in the consciousness of non-related departments. It also presents the academic focus and research output of the Art Museum, repositioning it in the domain of “core business” and

reinforcing its importance in the overall University structure. This exhibition has also assisted in cross-university collaborations, an area of high importance for the University.

In 2007 the La Trobe University Art Museum's annual exhibition program will be restructured with fewer exhibitions on campus and an increased focus on touring projects, moving further towards external promotion and audiences. As outlined the practical benefits are obvious – greater space for more comprehensive and complex exhibitions and a much greater and diverse audience. However, in an age of diminishing funding and greater accountability for all university areas, touring exhibitions can address key institution objectives. Touring exhibitions are able to position art museums and art collections as the public faces of universities – addressing community engagement aims. They are able to reinforce the notion that universities are a place for vocational education as well as a social and cultural one. They promote university research - visually with exhibitions and literary with accompanying publications – for work conducted by Art Museum staff and academics. They are able to attract potential students by promoting the university's cultural and educational credentials to a wider audience as well as communicate directly with families and parents who may only visit on Open Days. Moreover, touring exhibitions assist in promoting and exposing the university brand.

Although the La Trobe University Art Museum has no set kpi's or measurable goals (other than those objectives outlined in the Art Museum's annual operating plan), touring exhibitions have assisted with increasing our profile both internally and externally, has enabled us to address the key University wide objectives of teaching, learning and research and identified the role we play in ensuring La Trobe University meets its objective of remaining one of Australia's top ten universities. More importantly

though, touring exhibitions have placed us closer to the centre of ‘core business’ and ensure that we remain an integral part of university life.

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