Outside In:
The Tension between Curatorial Practice and Research

By Christine Stevenson & Margaret White

A collaborative exhibition, entitled *Drawing on the Art of Children: An Historical Perspective of Children's Art in the Twentieth Century,* was held in Sydney in 1997, and in Melbourne in 1998. This exhibition, curated by us, raises questions about the role and definition of research. Key questions include: Are exhibitions and their catalogues recognized as educational research? Is it useful to evaluate exhibitions in terms of their contribution to research?

We are both teacher educators situated in a program of early childhood education. Issues of early childhood education and teacher education are, therefore, frequently a focus of our work as scholars within the academy and teachers of and about the place of the arts in education and schools.

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The Context of the Research

Our shared interest in the socio-cultural contexts which affect the perception of children's art was instrumental in our collaboration on this exhibition. Several earlier collaborative exhibitions of children's art had raised significant research questions. In particular, two recurring and seemingly incongruous statements provided the germ of the idea for the

exhibition. When Picasso's claim, "Once I drew like Raphael but it has taken me a whole lifetime to learn to draw like a child," is set beside the rather disparaging comment, "My five-year-old could do that!," it exemplifies a paradox about the nature of adult's and children's art. Modernism provided a theoretical framework for such opposing viewpoints.

The collaborative style of this research drew on our individual skills and backgrounds. Margaret's interest in the history of early childhood education, the arts, and creativity, and Christine's interest in the links between children's art, Primitivism, and Modernism gave particular shape to the planning of the exhibition. Further collaboration with library staff, staff at the National Gallery of Australia, and catalogue designers, emphasized the essentially collaborative nature of this kind of research.

Are Exhibitions and their Catalogues Recognized as Research?

At present, exhibitions are not valued as highly as articles or book chapters, by the government bodies that fund universities in Australia. The research endeavor of curating an exhibition or writing a catalogue essay are seen as equivalent to writing a review of an art exhibition or performance. Clearly, this reality could act as a disincentive to those taking a pragmatic approach to their employment status. Apart from the research quantum, the labor-intensive nature of these projects is also a consideration in terms of allocation of time. So why have we chosen to continue putting our scholarly energies into exhibitions? Our choice is influenced by two further questions. Are there forms of recognition other than government funding models? And, could we use a broader definition of research?

As stated in the exhibition catalogue, "the conceptual basis for the exhibition has come from the engagement of children in making art and the perception and value which adults place on the process of artmaking" (White & Stevenson, 1997, p. 2). This engagement in artmaking is not easily communicated in writing. The concrete examples of children's art from a number of different sources are more likely to give a tangible sense of this engagement. With very few exceptions, we all share the experience of having once made drawings in our childhood.

Children's art is not only a source of fascination for some academics and artists, but offers points of inquiry for all adults curious about their own imaginative development. The universal interest in the freshness of the vision of children was beautifully described by Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig (1998) in his opening address at the Melbourne exhibition venue, Preshil school. His words appear to have some resonance with Picasso's statement referred to earlier.

> I am sometimes dumbfounded by children's art, by the poignancy and touching quality of children's drawings, they always catch me by surprise. It's a moving

> thing, always just a simple moving thing and tinged with a certain sadness. I can't interpret that sadness, perhaps there's some memory of the sense of childhood in every child's drawing. I think this is a very vitally important thing to keep coming back to, how we feel when we stand before them, apart from all that interpretation, all that documentation and understanding and child development that is so valuable, there is still this beautiful moment when we look at a child's drawing. And they're all so different, as we are all different, but eventually...there's one that seems to stop us...I suspect there's something lost, some memory, some beautiful thing, a sense of beauty there.

Perhaps a further reason for the choice of an exhibition to communicate ideas about contextual issues affecting the perception of children's art lies in contemporary beliefs about the way knowledge is configured. Our own ideas about children's art have been formed over a long period of time, beginning with strong childhood experiences. That viewers would come to the exhibition with their own set of lenses with which to make sense of the exhibited materials was therefore anticipated. As Robert Hodge and Wilfred d'Souza (1994, p. 38) point out:

> Visitors to a gallery...may be different in age, class, sex, language and cultural background from the communicators and each other. The effect of these differences is to stratify the whole display, so that the communicators'...message is received as a large number of different messages, some of them contrary to the original intended message.

The circulation of a plurality of meanings was something to be welcomed rather than avoided. It was also envisaged that an exhibition would challenge commonly-held assumptions about children's art and provide an opportunity for new ideas to be debated, not only amongst academics but in the wider community.

An Overview of the Development of the Exhibition

Once the conceptualization of the exhibition had been sketched out, the practicalities of developing the project can be related to a more conventional qualitative research project. For example:

◆ Data collection: Examples of children's art and archival material were initially sought from a range of Australian collections, both private and public. The Frances Derham Collection in the National Gallery of Australia, The Institute of Early Childhood archives and the Art Collection at Macquarie University, were the main public sources for the exhibition. Examples from private collections such as our own and of other colleagues were a further source for research. The key statements discussed at the beginning of this article provided the filter for selection of works over a period of two years.

◆ Interviews: A series of non-structured interviews conducted by us on the Melbourne site were recorded on videotape. Interviewees included the Principal of

Preshil School, parents of children at the school from a range of cultural backgrounds, several of the child artists who are now adults, and current and past teachers and children.

◆ Evaluations: Exhibition evaluations were completed by preservice teachers enrolled in the early childhood teacher education program at Macquarie University. The broad aim of the questionnaires was to evaluate the influence of the exhibition on these soon-to-be new teachers.

◆ Viewer responses: Visitors to the exhibition were invited to contribute a written response to the exhibition. In both venues a majority of visitors responded.

◆ Dissemination: The major vehicles for the dissemination of research were the catalogue and the exhibition itself. A Macquarie University competitive grant financed the production of a high quality colour catalogue with reproduction of the text panels and a foreword by the Vice-Chancellor, the Head of School, and the curators. Further dissemination took place at a faculty research seminar, an address given by Margaret at the Melbourne venue (White, 1998) and a conference paper presented by Christine (Stevenson, 1998).

Is it Useful to Evaluate Exhibitions in Terms of their Contribution to Research?

While, in the formal sense, the dissemination occurred in the various ways we have outlined above, in evaluating the contribution in the wider field of research as related to arts practice and teacher development and practice, the influence may be seen as more significant. Two particular examples come to mind.

While the exhibition was in Melbourne a public lecture was held during which Margaret outlined something of the story of the exhibition. A lively discussion developed about ways in which children's art has been viewed in the twentieth century during which many different perspectives became apparent. Among the participants was a Japanese (post)graduate visual arts student who came and introduced herself at the conclusion. She explained that she was a postgraduate student at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, and was developing an exhibition and thesis based on her exploration of *Raw, Native and Wild Art*. She was extremely keen to make a contact and an electronic mail dialogue was established. This connection has of course proven to be of mutual value. Chaco Kato (1998) brings to her work on Outsider Art her particular experience in Buddhist practice which has broadened our conception of this movement which embraces children's art, so-called "primitive" art, and art of the "mentally ill." This movement is again creating public interest and the connection has allowed Margaret to explore a new perspective which Kato has raised.

In a quite different connection, the child's painting which was reproduced in

the Melbourne newspaper in a major review of the exhibition, attracted the attention of Simon Lloyd, a curator who was developing an exhibition about embodiment. He asked to borrow the painting which was later sent by courier back to Melbourne for his exhibition. From that connection has grown a joint project to develop an exhibition which will bring together an American dancer and an Italian artist to collaborate with children in an interactive exhibition/installation.

Each of these connections has enabled our work to contribute to the development of new avenues of research in arts practice. And each has enabled us to relate our research to contemporary arts practice and to ask new questions about our own work. In J.J. Scheurich's (1997) terms, this has provided opportunities to re-examine our "realities" and interact with artist-researchers working from different perspectives. Such connections are clearly generative in terms of future research. Clearly, this conception of research encompasses a fruitful balance of arts theory and practice.

Discussion

The nature of the tension between academic research and curatorial research is another example of the balance between theory and practice. In particular, the conceptualization of the format, the pre-eminence of the visual and issues surrounding the framing of artworks, are of relevance in this discussion.

Conceptualization of the Exhibition Format

The enormous amount of material collected would have been sufficient for an exhibition space at least ten times the space available for the first venue, Macquarie University Library, Sydney. Culling the collected material was therefore a significant task and was integrally linked with the conceptualization of the six panels (which became the organizing "structure" of the artworks within the exhibition). The word "drawing," chosen as a convenient metaphor for linking each of the panels, appeared in the title of each panel. It is significant that these panel titles were formulated after the collection of data. This process of culling and focusing on particular aspects of the research can be likened to the process of coding of data in some kinds of qualitative research, such as, for instance, those based on grounded theory.

In common with other forms of research, some problems do not surface until the research is already in process. In using the exhibition as both a research tool and as a form of dissemination of the research, some problems arose which were of quite a different nature than the problems one may encounter in more traditional forms of research. Two of these, the privileging of the visual and the dilemma of the frame, were particularly problematic.

Privileging the visual. An exhibition, especially an exhibition of artworks, almost by definition privileges the visual. This may have unintended consequences. As an example, we need to understand the thinking behind the selection of works

for the panel revealing some of the links between children's art and Primitivism. Throughout the twentieth century, children's art has often been equated with Primitive art. Modern artists and critics often referred to children and "primitive" artists in a way which implied that they shared common characteristics. To suggest this, two carved panels from Papua New Guinea were juxtaposed with several examples of children's art from the mid-twentieth century. With hindsight this may have been counter productive as it may have reinforced the traditional links made between children's art and primitive art, children's art being seen as a subset of Primitivism. Had viewers not taken the trouble to read the catalogue or text panels they would surely have gained the impression that children's art is primitive in the sense of being unsophisticated, an impression obviously to be avoided.

The dilemma of the frame. The implicit messages in exhibitions undoubtedly have as much impact as the works themselves. The issue of framing children's works was one of the many factors considered in the attention to important details. If the works are physically framed are they made to seem precious? If they are not framed, does it appear that they are not valued? This dilemma resulted in the allocation of considerable time for the discussion of arguments for and against framing.

There is no question that the convention of framing adults' works gives them a particular status and elevates them to art objects. Framing children's art, a common contemporary practice, is presumably done for similar reasons, that is, to signal that these works are to be taken seriously as artworks. One of the reasons against the decision to frame many of the works was the belief that children's art is not the same as adult art. Framing the works may have tagged them with some of the negative associations linked with adult art in Western society—for instance their role as commodities. This was a difficult decision, particularly since all the works borrowed from the National Gallery had to be exhibited in frames for archival reasons.

Identifying Research Outcomes

Interaction between the cyclical processes of research and practice have been evident in the examples mentioned above regarding the contribution to the wider field. In contrast, while collating material for her recent research audit (akin to an annual research and teaching report or an annual report of scholarship activities) Margaret reflected on the high value placed in the audit on the publication of a book chapter she had written. In terms of interaction with the wider field, this brought minimal response. While this could be read as negative, the reality for many academics is that they frequently write for wide publication yet the response may be limited to a few colleagues. In comparison with the cyclical process experienced with the exhibition it was clear which project had been more generative for future research.

Current policies published by some universities appear to pave the way for new forms of research. As an example, the definition of research adopted by Macquarie University in Sydney places emphasis on the research outcomes rather than a preferred method or methodology.

> No one model of research enterprise is valued inherently more highly than another. Nor should it be, given the very different cultures, traditions and infrastructural requirements of different discipline areas, and the individual preferences of researchers. In the long view, the value of any research activity can only be determined by the intellectual, social, cultural and economic outcomes that it produces. (Macquarie University Web site, 1998)

The social and cultural outcomes are particularly relevant to this curatorial project. By raising questions about the perception of children's art in the twentieth century and identifying some of the probable influences on the changing perception of children's art, the exhibition effectively brought the debate into the public arena. This was a significant shift involving the recognition that children's art is not only the province of teachers and researchers, but of the public as well.

The interpretation of this particular institution's definition *of research*, however, is obviously influenced by the reality of government funding for research. While this is tied to the audit referred to above, a limited view of research is likely to be perpetuated. Which raises again the question about forms of recognition. In the first instance, it appears that it may be an issue of advocacy that individual institutions need to take up on behalf of their academic staff. From a wider perspective, we may see this as another aspect of arts advocacy that is in itself a cyclical issue. Just as recognition of the arts as significant forms of learning involves continuous justification in educational settings, so too the recognition of arts-based or arts-related research will continue to involve justification in Australian academic institutions. Our recent amalgamation, from being an independent college of higher education with a strong regard for the arts to becoming a section within a much larger university, exemplifies the struggle we have had as teacher education researchers. The efforts to have our teaching and researching, which rest and are centered in dynamic arts practices, "counted" have been difficult, and such recognition has been exacted at a high cost.

The complex role of curating exhibitions has been summarized by the former Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Bernice Murphy (1998). She emphasizes the significant role of "caring for things, relationships and ideas" and "revealing the contest of ideas that circulate around objects." This resonates with our perception of the curator's role and reminds us of the central place of research in the endeavor of curating exhibitions. Inherent in this endeavor, is the potential to make evident aspects of research and learning in the arts.

To arrange complex exhibits and to publish curatorial catalogues as research should no longer be, especially in universities of the twenty-first century, a recipe for perishing in the academy. The work we do has undoubtedly all the hallmarks of traditional and progressive modes of inquiry, those processes touted so well as being the epitome of scholarly work.

If exhibitions *are* to be evaluated in terms of research, our endeavors will need to expand to broaden the debate, to regard our community of practice in the arts as

a resource for widening our own perspectives as well as those of the academic community. May this publication be a catalyst for such debate!

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