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Artists and the Rite of Passage North to the Temperate Zone

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Abstract

Introduction

Three broad stages of Australia's arts and culture sectors may be discerned with reference to the Northern Hemisphere. The first is in Australia's early years where artists travelled to the metropolises of Europe to learn from acknowledged masters, to view the great works and to become part of a broader cultural scene. The second is where Australian art was promoted internationally, which to some extent began in the 1960s with exhibitions such as the 1961 'Survey of recent Australian painting' at the Whitechapel gallery. The third relates to the strong promotion and push to display and sell Indigenous art, which has been a key area of focus since the 1970s.

The Allure of the North

For a long time Australasian artists have mostly travelled to Britain (Britain) or Europe (Cooper; Frost; Inkson and Carr), be they writers, painters or musicians for example. Hecq (36) provides a useful overview of the various periods of expatriation from Australia, referring to the first significant phase at the end of the twentieth century when many painters left "to complete their atelier instruction in Paris and London". Many writers also left for the north during this time, with a number of women travelling overseas on account of "intellectual pressures as well as intellectual isolation" (Hecq 36). Among these, Miles Franklin left Australia in "an open act of rebellion against the repressive environment of her family and colonial culture" (37). There also existed "a belief that 'there' is better than 'here'" (de Groen vii) as well as a "search for the ideal" (viii). World War I led to stronger Anglo-Australian relations hence an increase in expatriation to Europe and Britain as well as longer-term sojourns. These increased further in the wake of World War II. Hecq describes how for many artists, there was significant discontent with Australian provincialism and narrow-mindedness, as well as a desire for wider audiences and international recognition. Further, Hecq describes how Europe became something of a "dreamland", with numerous artists influenced by their childhood readings about this part of the world and a sense of the imaginary or the "other". This sense of a dream is described beautifully by McAuliffe (56), who refers to the 1898 painting by A.J. Daplyn as a "melancholic diagram of the nineteenth-century Australian artist's world, tempering the shimmering allure of those northern lights with the shadowy, somnolent isolation of the south".



Figure 1: *The Australian Artist's Dream of Europe*; A.J. Daplyn, 1898 (oil on canvas; courtesy artnet.com)

In 'Some Other Dream', de Groen presents a series of interviews with expatriate Australian artists and writers as an insight into what drove each to look north and to leave Australia, either temporarily or permanently. Here are a few examples:

- Janet Alderson: "I desperately wanted to see what was going on" (2)
- Robert Jacks: "the dream of something else. New York is a dream for lots of people" (21)
- Bruce Latimer: "I'd always been interested in America, New York in particular" (34)
- Jeffrey Smart: "Australia seemed to be very dull and isolated, and Italy seemed to be thrilling and modern" (50)
- Clement Meadmore: "I never had much to do with what was happening in Melbourne: I was never accepted there" (66)
- Stelarc: "I was interested in traditional Japanese art and the philosophy of Zen" (80)
- Robert Hughes: "I'd written everything that I'd wanted to write about Australian art and this really dread prospect was looming up of staying in Australia for the rest of one's life" (128)
- Max Hutchison: "I quickly realised that Melbourne was a non-art consuming city" (158)
- John Stringer: "I was not getting the latitude that I wanted at the National Gallery [in Australia] ... the prospects of doing other good shows seemed rather slim" (178)

As the testimony here suggests, the allure of the north ranges from dissatisfaction with the south to the attraction of various parts of the world in the north.

More recently, McAuliffe describes a shift in the impact of the overseas experience for many artists. Describing them as business travellers, he refers to the fact that artists today travel to meet international art dealers and to participate in exhibitions, art fairs and the like. Further, he argues that the risk today lies in "disorientation and distraction rather than provincial timidity" (McAuliffe 56). That is, given the ease and relatively cheap costs of international travel, McAuliffe argues that the challenge is in adapting to constantly changing circumstances, rather than what are now arguably dated concepts of cultural cringe or tyranny of distance. Further, given the combination of "cultural nationalism, social cosmopolitanism and information technology", McAuliffe (58) argues that the need to expatriate is no longer a requirement for success.

Australian Art Struggles Internationally

The struggles for Australian art as a sector to succeed internationally, particularly in Britain, Europe and the US, are well documented (Frost; Robertson). This is largely due to Australia's limited history of white settlement and established canon of great art works, the fact that power and position remain strong hence the dominance of Europe and North America in the creative arts field (Bourdieu), as well as Australia's geographical isolation from the major art centres of the world, with Heartney (63) describing the "persistent sense of isolation of the Australian art world". While Australia has had considerable success internationally in terms of its popular music (e.g. INXS, Kylie Minogue, The Seekers) and high-profile Hollywood actors (e.g. Geoffrey Rush, Hugh Jackman, Nicole Kidman), the visual arts in

particular have struggled (O'Sullivan), including the Indigenous visual arts subsector (Stone). One of the constant criticisms in the visual art world is that Australian art is too focussed on place (e.g. the Australian outback) and not global art movements and trends (Robertson). While on the one hand he argues that Australian visual artists have made some inroads and successes in the international market, McAuliffe (63) tempers this with the following observation:

Australian artists don't operate at the white-hot heart of the international art market: there are no astronomical prices and hotly contested bidding wars. International museums acquire Australian art only rarely, and many an international survey exhibition goes by with no Australian representation.

The Push to Sell Australian Cultural Product in the North

Writing in the mid-nineties at the time of the release of the national cultural policy *Creative Nation*, the then prime minister Paul Keating identified a need for Australia as a nation to become more competitive internationally in terms of cultural exports. This is a theme that continues today. Recent decades have seen several attempts to promote Australian visual art overseas and in particular Indigenous art; this has come with mixed success. However, there have been misconceptions in the past and hence numerous challenges associated with promoting and selling Aboriginal art in international markets (Wright). One of the problems is that a lot of Europeans "have often seen bad examples of Aboriginal Art" (Anonymous 69) and it is typically the art work which travels north, less so the Indigenous artists who create them and who can talk to them and engage with audiences. At the same time, the Indigenous art sector remains a major contributor to the Australian art economy (Australia Council). While there are some examples of successful Australian art managers operating galleries overseas in such places as London and in the US (Anonymous-b), these are limited and many have had to struggle to gain recognition for their artists' works.

Throsby refers to the well-established fact that the international art market predominantly resides in the US and in Europe (including Britain). Further, Throsby (64) argues that breaking into this market "is a daunting task requiring resources, perseverance, a quality product, and a good deal of luck". Referring specifically to Indigenous Australian art, Throsby (65) reveals how

leading European fairs such as those at Basel and Cologne, displaying breath-taking ignorance if not outright stupidity, have vetoed Aboriginal works on the grounds that they are folk art. This saga continues to the present day, and it still remains to be seen whether these fairs will eventually wake up to themselves.

It is also presented in an issue of *Artlink* that the "challenge is to convince European buyers of the value of Australian art, even though the work is comparatively inexpensive" (Anonymous 69).

Is the Rite of Passage Relevant in the 21st Century?

Some authors challenge the notion that the rite of passage to the northern hemisphere is a requirement for success for an Australian artist (Frost). This challenge is worthy of unpacking in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and particularly so in what is being termed the Asian century (Bice and Sullivan; Wesley). Firstly, Australia is far closer to Asia than it is to Europe and North America. Secondly, the Asian population is expected to continue to experience rapid economic and population growth, for example the rise of the middle class in China, potentially representing new markets for the consumption of creative product. Lee and Lim refer to the rapid economic modernisation and growth in East Asia (Japan to Singapore). Hence, given the struggles that are often experienced by Australian artists and dealers in attempting to break into the art markets of Europe and North America, it may be more constructive to look towards Asia as an alternative north and place for Australian creative product. Fourthly, many Asian countries are investing heavily in their creative industries and creative economy (Kim and Kim; Kong), hence representing an opportune time for Australian creative practitioners to explore new connections and partnerships.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Australians felt compelled to travel north to Europe, especially, if they wanted to engage with the great art teachers, galleries and art works. Today, with the impact of technology, engaging with the art world can be achieved much more readily and quickly, through "increasingly transnational forms of cultural production, distribution and consumption" (Rowe et al. 8). This recent wave of technological development has been significant (Guerra and Kagan), in relation to online communication (e.g. skype, email), social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) as well as content available on the Web for both informal and formal learning purposes. Artists anywhere in the world can now connect online while also engaging with what is an increasing field of virtual museums and galleries. For example, the Tate Gallery in London has over 70,000 artworks in its online art database which includes significant commentary on each work. While online engagement does not necessarily enable an individual to have the lived experience of a gallery walk-through or to be an audience member at a live performance in an outstanding international venue, online technologies have made it much easier for developing artists to engage from anywhere in the world. This certainly makes the 'tyranny of distance' factor relevant to Australia somewhat more manageable.

There is also a developing field of research citing the importance of emerging artists displaying enterprising and/or entrepreneurial skills (Bridgstock), in the context of a rapidly changing global arts sector. This broadly refers to the need for artists to have business skills, to be able to seek out and identify opportunities, as well as manage multiple projects and/or various streams of income in what is a very different career type and pathway (Beckman; Bridgstock and Cunningham; Hennekam and Bennett). These opportunity seeking skills and agentic qualities have also been cited as critical in relation to the fact that there is not only a major oversupply of artistic labour globally (Menger), but there is a growing stream of entrants to the global higher education tertiary arts sector that shows no signs of subsiding (Daniel).

Concluding Remarks

Australia's history features a strong relationship with and influences from the north, and in particular from Britain, Europe and North America. This remains the case today, with much of Australian society based on inherited models from Britain, be this in the art world or in such areas as the law and education. As well as a range of cultural and sentimental links with this north, Australia is sometimes considered to be a satellite of European civilisation in the Asia-Pacific region. It is therefore explicable why artists might continue this longstanding relationship with this particular north.

In our interesting and complex present of the early twenty-first century, Australia is hampered by the lack of any national cultural policy as well as recent significant cuts to arts funding at the national and state levels (Caust). Nevertheless, there are opportunities to be further explored in relation to the changing patterns of production and consumption of creative content, the impact of new and next technologies, as well as the rise of Asia in the Asian Century. The broad field of the arts and artists is a rich area for ongoing research and inquiry and ultimately, Australia's links to the north including the concept of the rite of passage deserves ongoing consideration.

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