

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
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Session: *New Languages: Communicating with the Public*  
Paper title: *The Butterfly Effect: the natural history museum, visual art, and the suspension of disbelief.*

One of the major interests for me in the installation and curatorial projects I've produced in historical sites in Sydney is the way cultural information and artefacts are displayed for public viewing within the host institution. The notion of 'authenticity', whether referring to an object or a worldview, is the hub around which the validity of the museum display revolves. However, I regard this notion with a great deal of circumspection. For me, 'authenticity' in the museum or the institutionally managed historic site is qualified, not necessarily by 'factuality' or 'reality', but as a product of the host's 'authority'. According to anthropologist Ivan Karp writing in *Exhibiting Cultures: the politics and poetics of museum display*, 'every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it (1).

'Decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore others' (2). It is in this fracture and subject to this slippage that I like to work. This has characterized my installation and curatorial practice over the past ten years. The 1997 *Artists in the House!* project in Elizabeth Bay House, 1830s residence of Colonial Secretary Alexander Macleay, exhibited installations by 14 artists who freely interpreted the history and presentation of the house as museum. Likewise, *Swelter* in Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens, site of the First Fleet's 1788 landfall, featured 8 installations through 1999/January 2000, with the artists exploring themes pertinent to the site. My intention has been to create opportunities for visual artists to bring to these locations a range of critical, expressive and even entertaining interpretations of history and culture that can be enjoyed by the visual arts community and general public alike. But, I've also intended that the projects explore the hidden agendas inherent in these sites, to explore and critique the politics and poetics of their displays. This was again my intention with *The Butterfly Effect* project for the Australian Museum in 2005.

But how do we come to find artists invited to work in these hallowed domains, traditionally the protectorate of institutional curators and research personnel? The presence of visual art in ethnographic, social history and natural history museums is no longer a novelty. It is now an accepted fact. Since the mid 90s and groundbreaking exhibitions such as James Putnam's *Time Machine* at the British Museum, and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society the way has been paved for visual artists' work to be featured alongside and integrated into 'non-art' museum displays.

Progressive museum culture with its new brief of reappraisal and reform finally began to drain the formaldehyde from curatorial strategies. We've experienced a distinct shift from the traditional role of the museum as 'temple' – a universal, immutable edifice providing the public with carefully structured samples of a supposedly objective reality. The widely preferred model for the

'non-art' museum is now that of 'forum', a site of experimentation, debate and even confrontation; and there's nothing like a little controversy to get the public queuing at the turnstiles.

Artists, according to Putnam, have become celebrated as free agents who, with their diversity of idiosyncratic interests and analysis, are not bound by the standard classification systems that form the museum's backbone (3). Artists are unconstrained by the limitations of museological precepts and are thus well equipped to deconstruct and re-present the formal and often impersonal museum display. Working in these contexts, it is anticipated that they will offer 'insights beyond academic interpretations' and will 'take initiatives with groupings and juxtapositions that no museum curator would normally be allowed to consider' (4).

The idea of an artist's project for the Australian Museum had appealed to me for a number of years and I was interested in finding out what 'insights beyond academic interpretations' artists could bring to the scientific foundation of this museum. The sentiments of American artist, Eve Andrée Laramée, provided further inspiration:

'In my work I question the pervasive idea that art and science occupy completely unrelated realms. I try to draw attention to areas of overlap and interconnectivity between artistic exploration and scientific investigation, and the slippery human subjectivity underlying both processes. Through my work I speculate how human beings contemplate and consider nature through both art and science in a way that embraces poetry, absurdity, contradiction and metaphor' (5).

I proposed the idea of artists' interventions in the existing museum displays to Museum Director Frank Howarth early in 2004. The curatorial brief would require invited artists to reflect on themes of natural history, biological and geo sciences and the environment. The proposal received an enthusiastic response and the exhibition was scheduled for January 2005 so that it could be strategically included in the Sydney Festival of that year.

I had worked with Howarth previously. He was Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust at the time I produced the *Swelter* project. Through *Swelter* he was introduced to the controversy that often accompanies public projects such as these. Howarth commented that 'the *Swelter* project was responsible for considerable and lively debate and discussion among Gardens' (6) stakeholders and regular visitors, in particular the Friends of the Gardens who struggled with the role and relevance of the project to the Gardens.' Although he had to contend with troubled responses by stakeholders to the confronting use of the site and the free interpretations of the Trust's mission to maintain a scientific centre for botanic research, Howarth did concede that *Swelter* was 'successful in encouraging the visitation of a new audience to the Gardens whose interests lie more with the visual arts and crafts... this provided the Gardens with the opportunity to interpret its role within the community and promote its core business - plants - to a new audience' (7). At the time his response presented me with a

dilemma: could I accept that the success or failure of the project was to be assessed in terms of marketing and promotion, rather than as representative of a critical debate located at the 'ground zero' of European settlement in Australia?

I chose to be pragmatic then, as I did during *The Butterfly Effect* negotiations, reasoning that a relationship with a host institution whatever its motives would represent a mutual benefit. Artists would gain access to the Australian Museum and the host institution would gain the potential of expanding its audience base and promoting the viewing of its existing displays in a new light.

The Australian Museum is the country's oldest museum. It was founded in 1827, finally stemming the unchecked flow of flora, fauna and ethnographic specimens to Europe where there was a voracious scientific market as well as a cohort of private collectors clamouring for what were simply regarded as 'gorgeous curiosities' (8) from the antipodes. The museum began to compile an extensive and unique collection of specimens from the natural and geo sciences as well as cultural artefacts from the Pacific region. It is now reputed to be the largest collection in the southern hemisphere with the Museum boasting a well-respected international research reputation in natural history and indigenous studies. Over a period of more than 175 years the museum has amassed a staggering number of specimens and artefacts: 4 million insects, 1 million fish, 100,000 mammals and birds, over 1 million archaeological items, 110,000 ethnographic objects and over 60,000 rocks and minerals.

Succeeding generations have seen a number of incarnations of the museum, dictated by the architectural style of the time. Limitations in its design over the years have resulted in only a fraction of the collection being presented at any one time for public viewing. Like most major museums of its kind, the majority of specimens and artefacts are stored in several locations on and offsite in secluded regiments of compactus storage vaults, industrial pallet racks, ancient cupboards and solander drawers dizzying with the reek of mothballs. Current exhibits are a confusing, often garish clash of styles and periods that has come to characterize the displays accumulated in the museum since its inception.

It was this 'mish-mash' that confronted the 12 artists I invited to participate in *The Butterfly Effect*. The line-up comprised Brook Andrew, Tom Arthur, Michele Barker, Leon Cmielewski, Jackie Dunn, Joan Grounds, David Haines, Nigel Helyer, Joyce Hinterding, Anna Munster, Josephine Starrs, Louise Weaver, and myself. The installations would include sculpture, video, audio and interactive computer works.

The title of the exhibition, *The Butterfly Effect* was a nod in the direction of Edward Lorenz' writings on Chaos Theory (9). My particular interest in this regard was how in science, as in life and history, a chain of events can contain a critical point at which small, seemingly insignificant changes in an initial set of conditions can with little or no warning magnify and bring about momentous transformations. The 'critical point', or 'chain of events' in this

case was intended to emanate collectively from the artists, with the Museum representing the 'initial set of conditions'. The playfulness of this reference was to take on a more sombre tone with the exhibition opening shortly after the December 26<sup>th</sup> Asian tsunami and the realization of a greater significance in the main premise of Lorenz' 'Butterfly Effect': 'Can the flapping of a butterfly's wing in the forest set off a hurricane in the ocean?'

The Australian Museum attracts nearly 400,000 visitors per annum and the summer holiday period through February is an extremely busy time, especially 26<sup>th</sup> January, Australia Day, which is the Museum's Open Day. In examining the effect and relevance of the exhibition the question must be asked: apart from being a place to bring the kids on a rainy weekend or a box to tick on a tourist's rubber-necking itinerary, what brings members of the public to visit the Australian Museum? And what might the general public, the 'audience', expect of an exhibition such as *The Butterfly Effect* as it meanders through the rabbit warren of display halls?

Ronald Strahan, writing in *Rare and Curious Specimens*, an historical account of the Australian Museum's origins, states that it 'was envisaged as a scientific depot, a storehouse of the rare and exotic, an outstation for European museums and collectors, a grand encyclopaedia of knowledge' (10). The Museum's current charter has obviously moved on, but it still serves now, as it did then, to demonstrate the discovery of the Laws of Nature and how they organize the world according to rational, objective principles. The Museum's purpose and vision is now described under the rubric of an idealistic Corporate Strategy, 'To inspire the exploration of nature and cultures... in a beautiful and sustainable natural world with vibrant and diverse cultures' (11).

The natural world, according to this vision, is to be marvelled at. For that matter, we can say, 'so is Culture'. What insights then can visual art bring to a natural history museum? Alongside science with its strict, demonstrative discourse there is the language of visual art, a language that invokes meaning through symbol, metaphor, poetry, narrative and other elements valued for their revelatory power rather than as a strictly demonstrative force. It has been suggested that art, like religious discourse, 'gropes towards something beyond the phenomenal world that may give meaning to the universe' (12), and perhaps bring one closer to what David Hume described as the 'ultimate springs and principles of nature' (13) that are 'beyond human nature to fathom'. This romantic and idealized rationale though, far from providing insight, might interfere with or even threaten the efficient job that science makes of theorizing, mapping and cataloguing the observable world. Certainly, many conservative scientists would think so, and so too it would seem many lay visitors to the Australian Museum.

The majority of entries in the museum's visitors' book regarding *The Butterfly Effect* over the duration of the project expressed feelings of alienation, dismay and confusion at what the museum's role was expected to be. The response by some overseas visitors, for instance, was that they had not come all the way to Sydney to see art exhibits, but to gain insight into the natural and

anthropological history of the region. As far as they were concerned the merging of Science and its 'poor cousin', Art, had no place in this venue.

It seems that the average visitor to this particular museum sought a repository of things by which they could locate themselves in the world, and in its evolutionary trajectory. They sought evidence of the authenticity of this trajectory and seeing it disrupted, confusion, anxiety and alienation quickly followed. What was obviously missing from the way they experienced *The Butterfly Effect* was the willing suspension of disbelief that prefaces a visit to other entertainment emporia such as theatres, movie houses and art galleries, where it could be expected that the 'Meaning of Life' was going to be warped. – 'but not here, please'.

Once again, as with *Swelter*, I heard *The Butterfly Effect* being described as 'controversial', the equivalent of damning by feint praise this sort of project. I had hoped that I could avoid such a simplistic response and rather, generate more interesting debate. One of my works in the exhibition was titled *Genesis*. It was a video work suspended over the archway linking the *Dinosaurs* exhibit to the *Human Evolution* exhibit. It consisted of a large plasma screen progressively displaying the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. A messianic-sounding Gospel reader narrated the scrolling text. He was interrupted from time to time by crackling, hissing bouts of electrical interference and 'snow' like that on an out-of-tune TV set. The interference built in intensity until image and audio dissolved into complete chaos by the final passage – only to begin again in an endless loop.

The work did generate debate, but from a quarter I didn't anticipate. Around two weeks after the exhibition opened, the Museum's senior management received a signed protest by 20 members of staff ranging in importance from Principal Research Scientists, including 1 ARC Research Fellow, to Heads of Department and Technical Officers. The document protested the presence of *Genesis*, claiming that it was 'wholly inappropriate for the Australian Museum's evolution galleries'. The scientists opposed what they deemed to be a confrontational presentation of Creationism as a rival to Descent by Modification. They indicated that they were not prepared to tolerate what they perceived as 'controversy for its own sake', nor even entertain the lesser misdemeanour, 'all knowledge is opinion'. In their estimation, the inclusion of creationism in the evolution display was akin to including the subject in school science textbooks. They were critical of the *Genesis* installation's ambiguity in the context in which it was presented, but were unable in their literal responses to regard this slippage as intentional and primary to the ironic nature of the work. The scientists went on to suggest that an 'unambiguous disclaimer' accompany the work in case the public construe it as an official Museum exhibit. Such a disclaimer had in fact been included in the exhibition guide stating that 'the installations are creative statements and not necessarily the view of the Australian Museum'. Assistant Director, Janet Carding, responded to the protest quickly and constructively. The assurance was given that the Museum would in the future formulate a clear and consistent stance, through a process of staff discussion and consultation, on whether it is appropriate to include different perspectives in its exhibitions. She added that

the work would be maintained in its current form and that, in principal, she supported the provocative nature of exhibits such as *Genesis*. At least 'provocative' was an advance on 'controversial': progress indeed.

Ironically, a few months later George Bush and following hot on his heels, Brendan Nelson, then Australian Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, added their support for the Intelligent Design viewpoint, advocating its parallel teaching alongside evolution by natural selection in school curricula. One can almost envisage a day in the not too distant future when, pressured by a coalition of Nelson and the Family First Party's Steve Fielding, the Museum became obliged to include, alongside the Evolution by Natural Selection display, one devoted to Intelligent Design.

As far as controversy goes, the Museum has had its fair share, which put the 'Genesis affair' in the shade by comparison. For a period of five years prior to 2003, the museum's pest controller, Hank van Leeuwen with access to all areas, pilfered more than two thousand artefacts: skulls, skeletons, pickled and taxidermied animals, even a stuffed lion. Van Leeuwen removed the provenance evidence from these artefacts, rendering them, in museum terms, valueless. The legacy of this devastating act for *The Butterfly Effect* was an atmosphere of suspicion regarding the presence of the project's artists fostered by museum staffers for whom the thefts were still a painful memory. Access to behind-the-scenes areas by artists had to be methodically logged and carefully monitored. The scenario facing any researcher, artist or otherwise, authorized to study artefacts from the anthropological collection housed deep in the belly of the museum, is daunting. One is ushered into a small chain-link fenced enclosure, which is furnished with a table, chair, desk lamp and an electric bell. The requested artefact is brought in and the researcher is locked in the cage until the task is completed and the collection supervisor summoned by ringing the bell.

Another period of excitement followed the announcement in 2002 by then Director, Mike Archer, that scientists at the museum would attempt to recreate the genetic library of the extinct Tasmanian Tiger, or Thylacine, from a 100 year-old preserved specimen. Archer claimed that he fully intended to have a pet Tasmanian Tiger before he died. The project was regarded in many quarters as being a 'PR stunt' – an attempt, according to Stewart Taggart writing in the e-journal, *Wired*, 'to re-brand arcane genetic research into a kind of neo-sacred journey to restore lost Arcadia' (14). The project also made conservationists uneasy, claiming that such possibly futile exhibitionism would hurt the cause of conservation rather than help it.

The public's response to the attempted Thylacine cloning project was nothing short of frenzied. In an online poll on the Museum's website, over 11,000 people supported the attempt, with only 1000 opposing it. Artists Michele Barker and Anna Munster, invited to participate in *The Butterfly Effect*, decided to respond to, 'the fascinating and disturbing issues' arising from the project. In particular, they were interested in how a scientific project such as this could capture the public's imagination. In the catalogue they state: 'Regenerating extinct species raises many issues for humans – how we

originally contributed to the extinction and what it means to technologically produce and control new life' (15). The artists chose to work in the Museum's 'Lord Howe Island' diorama in the Skeleton Hall. Installed in the 1920s, it is one of the few dioramas to have survived intact in the Museum and, as they remarked, 'dioramas such as these are like extinct specimens from museum's histories'. Barker and Munster embarked on a cloning project of their own – to digitally reconstruct the Thylacine and releasing it, as it were, into the Lord Howe Island environment, a habitat entirely different from the creature's origins. The artists explain: 'By using digital moving image in relation to the diorama space, we could play with the potential for mutation and fantasy that these technologies provide' (16).

Just as the artists succeeded in their digital cloning in January 2005, the news was released the following month that Archer's project was never to be fulfilled. Director Howarth, claiming that the existing DNA from the bottled specimen was too degraded to allow anything other than an initial start to be made, dumped the real cloning project (17). Needless to say, Archer must have been devastated – but the artists enjoyed the attention it brought to their work.

Finally, despite the mixed reception of *The Butterfly Effect*, I'm confident that the rich dialogue between the visual arts and the sciences will continue, particularly with regard to the locations in which their specialized knowledge is made accessible to the public. Robert Laughlin and David Pines note in *The Theory of Everything*, 'For better or worse, we are now witnessing a transition from the science of the past, so intimately linked to reductionism, to the study of complex adaptive matter, firmly based in experiment, with its hope for providing a jumping-off point for new discoveries, new concepts and new wisdom' (18).

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