"Outside the Gum Tree" – The Visual Arts in Multicultural Australia

The National Association for the Visual Arts is the national advocacy, lobby and research organisation for the visual arts, crafts and design in Australia.

by Helen Andreoni

Preamble

(NOTE:
NESB1 = non-English speaking background, first generation
NESB2 = non-English speaking background, second generation)

This study is part of a much wider movement currently going on in Australia to learn more about the experiences, strengths and difficulties of artists of non-English speaking background. The focus of this particular study is on the experiences and current practice of overseas born visual artists and crafts people of non-English speaking background who have spent some of their working life in Australia. For the sake of simplicity and ease of reading, these artists will be referred to in this study as NESB1 visual artists.

Before giving further details about the study, let us step back a little from the immediate and the local and take a wider perspective.

Is there a problem and whose is it?

Why is it that being an NESB1 visual artist is an issue? Many such artists and most gallery directors will tell you that the issue of where an artist is born is irrelevant and for some even offensive. After all many great visual artists found fame whilst working in countries where they were not born. Chagall was Jewish, born in Russia but lived most of his life in France. Van Gogh was born in the Netherlands but created many of his most memorable paintings in France. Picasso was born in Spain and spent much of his working life in France. How is the experience of NESB1 visual artists in Australia different? It is easy enough to point to NESB1 visual artists, both past and present, who have been very successful in Australia. What is the problem?

That there is a problem is manifest by the fact that many NESB1 visual artists and their supporters are expressing their discontent in a variety of forums. They lament the treatment they and their artforms have received in Australia. This study will in part document the problem. It will look at the criticisms and solutions proposed, and analyse their content and focus.

The problem is not only one felt by NESB1 visual artists. Federal and State agencies, in different ways, have been anxious to be seen to be doing something about the "problem". As always, each struggle develops around a particular source of power. In this instance the source of power might be the Australia Council, a State arts department, a public gallery. Attempts to counteract what are perceived as "the reinforcement of all the structures of confinement" are met with "localised counterresponses, skirmishes, active and occasionally preventive defences". This study seeks to document and understand the dynamics of these power struggles and shifts.

Why encourage cultural minorities into the visual arts?

Another very basic question to ask is why government in various forms is ostensibly

encouraging greater participation of cultural minorities in the arts generally. An analysis will be made of some relevant government policy initiatives but before doing this it is well to acknowledge that some people regard such initiatives with considerable cynicism. They see parallels between the worlds of art and sport where it is possible for members of cultural and linguistic minorities to succeed. These are contrasted to other avenues of endeavour which are less accessible. The few successes in the arts and sport then stand as shining and very public symbols of how democratic, egalitarian and culturally unbiased Australian society is, without affording any real threat to the status quo.

Another related question is whether or not the visual arts is an area worth getting into from the perspective of cultural minorities, given the poor financial returns experienced by the majority of artists in Australia, even many of the more established ones.

What is the role of cultural minorities in the visual arts?

As this preamble suggests, the issues to be explored in this study are complex and changing. They are not unique to Australia. Some elements are shared by other countries which have culturally diverse populations where power and resources are located in the hands of a largely monocultural, monolingual elite, who control institutions ensuring these reflect their ethnocentric values and priorities. In such societies, frustrations are created when people belonging to different cultural and linguistic traditions find their very right to function as visual artists is denied them. Visual artists belonging to or linked with "other" cultural traditions find that they are sometimes ignored or asked to play the role of the outsider, irrespective of who they are, what they are doing through their art or where they come from.

Whilst some current powerbrokers in the art world would deny that Aboriginal and NESB1 visual artists are being treated as outsiders, it is a fact that the institutions which still control decision making and resource allocation in the

visual arts were set in place when Australian artists were using these same outsiders to define what was unique about Australian art.

At a point in Australian art history, Australian art was defined by what it was not: it was not Aboriginal art, it was not Asian art, it was not European art. It is not accidental that those same forms of "other" art are still often used to define the borders between Australian and non-Australian visual art.

Those hidden elements of the historical domain which still affect current cultural discourse, have to be brought to the surface and analysed in their specific contexts. Only then can we really begin to understand how the past impacts on the present and make sensible decisions about future directions in the visual arts for a multicultural Australia.

How have Aboriginal and NESB1 visual artists and their art been a part of the process of defining Australia's past and present culture, vision and reality? In contemporary Australia, are they still being asked to play the part of the "Other", the "Outsider"? Which institutions, if any, have adopted "vigilant positions" or "delineated and restricted artistic encounters"? Is the role required of Aboriginal and NESB1 visual artists still affected by a perception of their "differentness"?

This study is partly about identifying those concepts and historical positions which might be currently guarding against an open and informed debate about the visual arts for a multicultural Australia. It aims to present the issues from a range of cultural, social, political and geographical perspectives.

The very language and labels used to conduct such a study and debate inevitably narrow the range of perspectives taken. The most obvious manifestation of this is the fact that this study and most of the research referred to are written in English. The use of labels and categories such as "NESB", "ethnic" or "multicultural art" or "the arts for a multicultural Australia" links into the debate about what is Australian, what is

Australian art, and what and who does not "really" belong.

Who defines what is Australian visual art?

At the most pedestrian level, Australian art is something: "...produced with a significant amount of labour by people who are resident in Australia for some of their lives." By this definition, NESB1 visual artists would qualify to be recognised and supported to the same degree as any other Australian visual artists.

However, the debate is confused by the belief in or the search for "recognisable Australian qualities in the works themselves." The corollary of this could become that there is, by definition, something un-Australian about the work of NESB1 visual artists in Australia. As proof of this kind of discrimination at work, some NESB1 visual artists living in Australia maintain that NESB1 visual artists' credentials and contributions are subjected to greater scrutiny or even worse, denigrated or ignored. One focus of this study is to determine if indeed this is so and if it is, in what ways, how and why.

Why focus on the visual arts in multicultural Australia?

For many, the visual arts should be the area where cultural and particularly linguistic issues least impact on how an artist works and is perceived. The debate about Australian art versus "ethnic" and "multicultural art" is very intense in the visual arts because, for some, this categorising and labelling according to ethnicity, language and place of birth is absurd, offensive and irrelevant. Even worse, they argue, it affects the capacity of NESB1 visual artists to function as visual artists in Australia.

Others present a different point of view. They argue that the monolingual and monocultural environment in which NESB1 visual artists must operate in Australia ensures that without some kind of acknowledgment of the systemic discrimination and racism at work in Australian society and some clear government policies and resources to counteract such discrimination and racism, NESB1 visual artists will not be able to function to their fullest potential.

Conclusions

Introduction

Tidy as it might be, there is no one set of policies and strategies that could inform initiatives for the visual arts for a multicultural Australia at the individual and institutional level. In Australia, a democratic country with a complex structure of federal, state and local governments, there are a whole series of possible policies and strategies.

Chapters two to six identify a range of policy positions, some of the strategies that have evolved to implement them, and the outcomes of those policies and strategies for NESB1 visual artists and visual arts institutions. Chapter seven looked at the experience at state and federal levels in the light of the policies and strategies identified. Chapters eight and nine, through the case studies, documented the experiences, attitudes and suggestions of some key stake holders in particular states.

Chapter ten (this chapter) seeks to:

• pull together the common threads and shared experiences;

• identify the range of strategies encountered in terms of whether they are co-operative, confrontationalist or designed to maintain the status quo;

• make recommendations, conscious of the fact that so many powerful recommendations have already been made over the last ten years and more.

Common Threads and Shared Experiences

We have seen in both the multicultural and arts policy areas that assimilation policies generate two kinds of reactions, often present at the same time. One response is for NESB Australians to

become highly politicised and demand that their particular needs be met through specialist multicultural/ethnic organisations either community based or with government support. The alternative response, is for NESB Australians to seek to assimilate into the society as it is, accepting existing systems and institutions.

Whilst a policy of assimilation, and consequently the above responses, are largely things of the past, institutions and labels created in the assimilationist period still survive. They survive either because the ethnic communities have been successful in creating political space or because NESB Australians are still encountering assimilation strategies in practice even if at the level of policy rhetoric, assimilation has all but disappeared. This experience is particularly true for newly arrived NESB1 Australians.

NESB1 visual artists in multicultural Australia show a similar response to assimilationist attitudes and practices. On the one hand there are specialist organisations that focus on ethnic/multicultural visual arts, highlighting the discrimination experienced by NESB1 visual artists. Equally, there are large numbers of NESB1 visual artists who absolutely refuse to have anything to do with specialist ethnic/multicultural visual arts organisations and insist that culture and language background are either private or irrelevant characteristics for the visual artist.

The above reactions and specialist organisations may well have been created over a decade ago but the demarcation lines remain and continue to inform the present. The distance between the two groups of NESB visual artists creates real problems for both government and ethnic communities seeking to develop and implement policies for the visual arts for a multicultural Australia.

Further, the above structures and responses do not have any mechanisms built into them that would encourage the major visual arts institutions to question from within the way they are responding to the NESB1 visual artists. The specialist multicultural arts bodies are operating largely in the political arena; the NESB1 artists who wish to work within the existing visual arts institutions are keeping their culturally and linguistically diverse heads down. This ensures that visual arts institutions can continue to maintain the myth that they are operating in a way that is culturally and linguistically neutral.

The situation cannot continue for a variety of reasons:

• In times of economic hardship, it gets harder and harder to maintain political space and the related specialist targeted funds.

• Well-established NESB1 visual artists have grown tired of playing assimilationist games and are starting to explore their ethnicity and migration experience in a very public way. NESB2 visual artists have largely ignored the game.

• The powerbrokers in the visual arts world are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of the cultural and language issues in their decision making and power structures.

These realisations have been reflected in policy shifts. Some visual arts institutions and bureaucracies have indicated that they may be prepared to consider the possibility that multicultural policy might have some relevance for the visual arts. Some are already doing so. Hence the shift in various forms to the notion of the visual arts for a multicultural Australia. This signals a move into the central ground, away from the extreme positions that were generated by assimilationist policies. Now is the time to capitalise on such moves, but how?

Identifying the problem

The overarching problem is that racism still exists in Australia today and that systemic discrimination is still very much a part of the fabric of Australian institutions.

It is a major concern that even with a population that is culturally and linguistically very diverse, still some visual art institutions persist in claiming that it is possible to define notions of excellence, quality, aesthetics and standards, as though these could be determined in a cultural, linguistic and social vacuum.

If the ethnic communities and the visual art institutions do not update their responses to the cultural experiences and visual arts of the 1990s, they will become increasingly irrelevant.

The visual arts in Australia, in order to thrive, need to have access to all the talented and dedicated visual artists living in Australia, not just some of them and under certain conditions.

No one should underestimate the difficulties involved in finding solutions to the above problems. Those solutions will not be found by different constituencies operating in isolation. We have seen the enormous pressure put on cultural workers who do not find the necessary support from within their visual art institutions.

All need to be aware of the stultifying weight of the respective cliches about each other that they bring to the task.

Creating the right climate for change

The first stage of any effective change strategy is the acknowledgement by all parties that there is a problem. This is by no means an easy task especially for those who currently control most power and resources.

In order for solutions to be found, a climate of trust has to be created in which the individual feels free to explore honestly issues of identity, ethnicity, cultural and language heritage and how these impact on the visual arts. Without a climate of trust there is a continuing danger of people being labelled as outsiders, victims, racists, dependents, ethnics, anglos, NESBs and ESBs.

Borders between groups have to be made permeable to enable the exploration of the "other" perspective from different cultural, language, community, or bureaucratic points of view. Only then will it be possible to appreciate the strengths and difficulties of the NESB1 visual artist, and of the arts administrator or curator working in a gallery, a department or in the community. There must be a mutual presumption of good faith for this to be possible.

How to begin?

One of the first tasks for those who find themselves in antagonistic positions, if they wish the situation to change, is to identify significant shared experiences. This study reveals something all visual artists in Australia share.

In different ways, all the visual artists operating in Australia, have to contend with what Robert Hughes calls "cultural colonialism". He defines it thus:

> The essence of cultural colonialism is that you demand of yourself that your work measure up to standards that cannot be shared or debated where you live.

This is the experience of Australian visual artists, of whatever background who seek recognition in the international visual arts world. It is also the experience of visual artists in Australia who seek to reproduce the traditional visual arts of their source country, divorced from the cultural, linguistic and ecological environment that first gave rise to those visual arts. It is the experience of NESB1 visual artists who seek acceptance in Australia's visual art world but who have no input into the standards by which they are judged.

The focus of any joint initiative would be to look at ways to ensure that the standards by which judgements are made about visual arts are shared and debated across the full range of visual artists living and working in Australia. Without this level of control, Australian visual artists remain vulnerable to standards formulated elsewhere.

By the manipulation of such standards, almost anything can be seen to fail, no matter what sense of finesse, awareness and delight it may produce in its actual setting.
(Robert Hughes)

One of the hardest things to acknowledge is how difficult it is to take the first step across cultural and linguistic borders. Once crossed, the next time it is easier because the very existence of other worlds has been established.

There are different ways of creating the climate for crossing such barriers: working within ethnic communities; immersion in a different culture country and language; building on cultural insights; shared significant tasks. An example of a first step would be the acknowledgement that visual arts institutions were wrong about the way they viewed Aboriginal art previously. Another might be when lessons are learned through the discrimination experienced by women artists. These lessons could then be applied to the other areas of discrimination in the arts, including the experience of NESB1 visual artists.

Strategies for the Visual Arts in Multicultural Australia in the 1990s

It is not possible to identify "good" strategies and "bad" strategies. Their value is determined by the context in which they are operating and whether or not there is enough commitment and resources to ensure that the strategies achieve their objectives. Nor should one forget that good and bad are relative concepts, dependent on who is making the judgement and for what purposes.

Some existing strategies

It is not as though we are looking at a "tabula rasa" where nothing has been done to deal with the problems already identified, on the contrary. The following is a list of strategies which attests to the efforts that have been made across Australia to promote and to resist change in the visual arts for a multicultural Australia.

The following list identifies a range of strategies according to whether they are based on notions of co-operation, confrontation or maintaining the "status quo". To illustrate the point that there is no such thing as an empirically "good" or "bad" strategy, one or two of the positives and negatives of each strategy seen from the perspective of the NESB1 visual artist and the visual arts institution operating in today's multicultural Australia, are identified. Many of these value judgements are entirely arbitrary. The purpose of such a selective and value-laden presentation of strategies is to begin the essential process of looking behind strategies in order to consider the needs and outcomes of specific contexts.

Co-operation strategies

Identifies existence of discrete group requiring specialist intervention.

- NESB + Acknowledgement of special needs of NESB group.

- NESB - Acknowledged as having less power, access to resources.

- INSTITUTION + Communication channels with NESB group established.

- INSTITUTION - NESB group likely to demand more than the institution can give.

Information from NESB to institution through conferences, workshops, meetings, research, consultations, forums, advisory committees, reference groups.

- NESB + Some evidence of outsiders expressing interest in NESB experience and suggestions.

- NESB - No requirements on institution to do anything with the research information and recommendations.

- INSTITUTION + Can use existence of communication channels to deflect criticism about inaction.

- INSTITUTION - Activities of institution likely to be subjected to greater scrutiny by NESB groups.

Limited, short-term funding and appointments for selected NESB individuals and groups. Inadequate funds, resources, support structures and training to enable task to be completed satisfactorily.

- NESB + Some NESB individuals and groups able to establish forums for discussion and some employment.

- NESB - Government control through funding or parameters of research and discussion. Failure reflects back on NESB individual.

- INSTITUTION + Easy access to NESB communities in order to satisfy consultation requirements with specific constituencies.

- INSTITUTION - If no action, institution likely to be criticised for tokenism.

No long-term plan for changing culture of the institution. Short-term programmes, appointments for NESB staff.

- NESB + NESB individual groups tackle short-term changes with enthusiasm and dedication.

- NESB - Burnt-out disillusionment. High stress levels of NESB involved in seeking change without long-term planning.

- INSTITUTION + No requirement to effect substantive change. Initiatives can be stopped when funds are limited or for a shift of policy focus.

- INSTITUTION - Leaves large disaffected number of NESB individuals and groups outside of ambit of institution. Expectations dashed when programmes cease.

Selected information campaign about existing institutional initiatives for NESB in Languages Other Than English.

- NESB + More members of selected NESB communities are likely to learn about sources of funding and support.

- NESB - Unlikely to put the spotlight on need for changes to existing systems, focused as it is on all that is good in the institution.

- INSTITUTION + Good public relations exercise for the institution. Helpful for those seeking to effect change from within the institution.

- INSTITUTION - Language groups not covered in campaign likely to feel disenfranchised and resentful.

Emphasis put on communicating and co-operating across NESB communities.

- NESB + NESB become aware of experiences and difficulties of other cultural minorities.

- NESB - Individuals and groups focused on ethno-specific issues unlikely to get funds. Specific language and cultural heritage resources lost.

- INSTITUTION + Less likely that cross NESB group tensions will be given a forum for expression.

- INSTITUTION - Specific ethnic communities focused on cultural survival and maintenance feel abandoned.

NESB individuals and groups become public symbols of the institution's espousal of cultural democracy.

- NESB + Able and encouraged to maintain and emphasise cultural and linguistic differences.

- NESB - Differences with ESB Australians over-emphasised and sustained.

- INSTITUTION + Very useful public

relations tool for publications and public promotion. Clear images also for political campaigns.

- INSTITUTION - Maintain focus on cultural differences of NESB individual and product created by NESB individual, irrespective of whether this is appropriate or desired by the NESB individual.

"Status quo" strategies

Mainstreaming of services - no identifiable NESB policy, programme, support structures, funds.

- NESB + All NESB treated the same as all other Australians.

- NESB - No acknowledgement that systemic discrimination works against NESB.

- INSTITUTION + Resources not fragmented across specialist programmes.

- INSTITUTION - Few NESB able to access the resources and services.

Selection criteria for making judgements about staffing, funding, activities uniform and never revealed or exposed to scrutiny.

- NESB + Work of NESB assessed using the same criteria as that used for ESB. "Successful" work seen as Australian.

- NESB - No acknowledgement that criteria used to make judgements about NESB work are culture-specific.

- INSTITUTION + Need to have staff skilled only in making judgements from a monocultural perspective. Failure of NESB artist/art outcome of failings in NESB or product.

- INSTITUTION - Much material created by NESB unlikely to be seen by institution. Likely to seek support within ethnic community and/or source country.

Staff and clients treated like any other Australian irrespective of gender, cultural and language background, disability, social class, economic circumstances and current and previous locations.

- NESB + Success comes without the qualifications that are inevitable if NESB get special programme and considerations.

- NESB - Encourages NESB individual/group to downplay cultural and linguistic differences and not use, learn or maintain a language other than English.

- INSTITUTION + Institution can continue to function as though it were in a homogeneous, monolingual, monocultural society. Few avenues provided for NESB to attack institution.

- INSTITUTION - Those unable to learn English and adopt designated behaviour, not able to be part of the institution and access its resources. Less pressure on institution.

No information campaigns in Languages Other than English or through NESB organisations.

- NESB + Bilingual, bicultural assimilated NESB can play significant symbolic role highlighting equitable nature of institution "I made it, so can you!"

- NESB - Only those who speak English and understand and accept the system in place can get employment, promotion and access to resources.

- INSTITUTION + No applications from NESB for jobs, grants. This is seen as the client's not the institution's problems.

- INSTITUTION - Only tapping a limited section of the population. Large NESB community potential source of social conflict and resentment.

Constant changing of management structures, policy thrusts, spending priorities, programmes,

consultation mechanisms. Anything seeking change, subject to reviews.

- NESB + Different NESB have short-term success as the wheel spins.

- NESB - Difficult for anyone including NESB to understand the system and make use of its resources.

- INSTITUTION + Staff too busy surviving to spend time planning and translating rhetoric into reality. Therefore outcomes remain unchanged.

- INSTITUTION - NESB community gives up on the institution altogether and relies on its own resources which it can access and control.

An impressive barrage of published policy documents, strategies, performance indicators which target a wide range of interest groups. The above are not given adequate resources and power to ensure successful implementation.

- NESB + The naive/young/enthusiastic/ obstinate/bloody-minded/NESB use policy documents as levers not within institution but in the political domain to affect change.

- NESB - A predictable cycle of NESB enthusiasm and hope for change turning to exhaustion, disillusionment, defeat or aggression.

- INSTITUTION + Documents available which facilitate stalling tactics when criticisms are made of policy implementation.

- INSTITUTION - Change of governments would require a whole new set of policy documents etc. to be written.

Define the cultural and linguistic issue as irrelevant and focus exclusively on economic issues, diverting most funds, support structure to this domain.

- NESB + Only assimilated economically

literate NESB will succeed.

- NESB - Success of NESB in non-economic domains will be ignored or downplayed.

- INSTITUTION + Institution can focus its energies exclusively on the economic domain.

- INSTITUTION - If institution does not succeed in economic domain - irrespective of other achievements - it will be deemed to have failed.

Confrontation strategies

Racism in Australian society formally acknowledged.

- NESB + Legitimises significant personal experience and difficulties. Potential for solidarity across cultural minorities.

- NESB - Focuses on NESB as target of discrimination, victims, powerless, low status.

- INSTITUTION + Legitimises dealing with a fundamental area of human relations which was previously kept hidden.

- INSTITUTION - Tends to brand everyone as racist. Generates resentment/backlash in both well-disposed and racist.

Government instrumentalities are required to act according to mandatory directives designed to reduce racism.

- NESB + Evidence that government find racism unacceptable and that it is a problem shared by all Australians.

- NESB - Tends to focus on difficulties of NESB, ignoring their achievements, resources and other significant experiences.

- INSTITUTION + Must dedicate some resources to considering and dealing with systemic racism and change.

- INSTITUTION - Easy to meet letter of

requirements without instituting any significant systemic changes. Fosters cynical hoop-jumping.

Policies, strategies and performance indicators developed to combat racism.

- NESB + Some institutional support and processes in place to deal with racism.

- NESB - Overt racism replaced by covert racism which becomes increasingly vicious and subtle.

- INSTITUTION + Institution commits itself to an ongoing process of policies and strategies for dealing with racism and discrimination.

- INSTITUTION - Some few individuals get very good at writing 'worthy' policies, strategies etc.

Closer links established with NESB communities through consultative mechanisms, appointments of NESB to staff and NESB advisory bodies.

- NESB + Some individuals and groups of NESB elevated in status and power as leaders of NESBs, communicating with government.

- NESB - Other NESB individuals and groups disenfranchised e.g. NESB women, communities in rural areas. Calibre of appointees questioned because of affirmative action.

- INSTITUTION + Existence of NESB consultation mechanisms useful "outside" pressure point to maintain the pressure for change within the institution.

- INSTITUTION - Contacts with NESB community likely to reveal that problem is more entrenched and extensive than first thought.

Higher profile and more NESB individuals involved at the institutional level.

- NESB + Role model for other NESB to work from within the system.

- NESB - NESBs required to be all knowing. Often required to absorb resentment/backlash of racists and supportive ESB individuals.

- INSTITUTION + More likely to get current, quality information of NESB experience, instead of working from stereotypes.

- INSTITUTION - Raised expectations and enthusiasm after years of assimilation will create demands that cannot be met.

Fund bodies outside institution largely made up of NESB individuals who have been critical of past performance of institution.

- NESB + Able to dictate the agenda and define the parameters of the "problem". Many distinct political constituencies.

- NESB - Seen to own the territory, excluding those who define the issues and tactics differently.

- INSTITUTION + Brings extreme, critical elements into the institution's ambit. For continued funding these are required to implement policy.

- INSTITUTION - Having provided NESB with political platform and resources, difficult to cease funding.

NESB only keepers of the knowledge and experiences of racism.

- NESB + Only NESB can present and deal with issues of racism, and can be involved in specialist NESB organisations and representation.

- NESB - Other supportive minorities (based on gender, locality, disability) and supportive ESB individuals and groups are excluded as are their knowledge, experience, and network designed to combat discrimination.

- INSTITUTION + Credentials information got through NESB sources and puts it above dispute.

- INSTITUTION - Racism dealt with in isolation. Other groups experiencing discrimination have to mount parallel campaigns. Energies of minorities dispersed.