

A semiotic analysis of the Australian Museum's *Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples Exhibition*

Preamble

This is intended to be a careful and useful analysis of the new Indigenous Australian exhibition at the Australian Museum. However, it may be useful if I say unambiguously at the outset that I see no merit in pretending to be objective about its aims, values and accomplishment. I was profoundly impressed by this exhibition. I regard it as a significant event in museology and in Australian cultural history. So I will not waste space in demonstrating the fact of its success, but will ask what I hope will be more useful questions about implications and possibilities the exhibition raises, to assist in developing the present exhibition over the next ten years, to design other similar exhibitions by the Museum in other locations, or to spell out lessons that other museums might learn from this exhibition.

What is semiotics?

This report gives a 'semiotic' analysis of the exhibition. In order to make it more generalisable I'll first sketch out what 'semiotics' is and isn't, for purposes of this report.

In its classic sense as defined by Saussure (1974) semiotics is nothing less than 'the science of the life of signs in society'. 'Signs' include all carriers of meaning used by humans, verbal and non-verbal, all the many 'languages' through which communication takes place, consciously or not, intended or not. Semiotic activity is intrinsically social, taking place in society as a dynamic and interactive process, and meaning occurs only in interaction, never as an intrinsic property of any sign. This activity has its own 'life', as signs and meanings circulate and change and are changed by every interaction, so that the 'life' of signs is woven into the life processes of society itself.

Some writers have used 'semiotics' in a narrower sense, to refer only to particular terms and tenets of one or other particular school of semiotics, which its acolytes will claim has made all other knowledge of signs obsolete or worse. That is a too-familiar tactic of academic imperialism. The 'life of signs in society' has been of obsessive interest to humans ever since society began, however many hundreds of thousands of

years ago. Everyone who creates or attends an exhibition like this one is a practical semiotician whose talents and understandings have to be respected in any useful semiotic analysis. A wide range of approaches to producing or analysing exhibitions are semiotic methods in their way. The semiotic method used in this report is inclusive. It affirms the semiotic wisdom of all participants and the semiotic value of the products of a range of methods. At the same time it tries to be deeper and more systematic, to integrate its analyses across more codes, media, users, purposes and levels. Semiotic analysis in this spirit does not negate or dismiss analyses made, formally or informally, by other means, but incorporates and extends them into a wider and more complex picture.

In his Director's Report for 1996-97 Dr Des Griffin commented on the work of Evaluation Coordinator Lynda Kelly's work over the past three years, that it 'has helped us to better understand the match between what visitors say they want from exhibitions and how they actually behave in exhibitions' (page 4). This statement is a useful way to help to clarify how semiotics can complement the ongoing work of museum staff in evaluating exhibitions. Listening to people is important but it isn't enough, because what really matters are the deeper sources of meaning which produce what people say and what they do, everything they say and do, not just what they produce in response to a survey or during a museum visit. Watching behaviours is a useful check on people's words, but behaviours like words also need to be read and interpreted. From a semiotic point of view the crucial questions concern the meaning complexes which generate words and behaviours alike. Semiotics attempts to find a bridge between the different kinds of indicator or sign-systems (words under different circumstances, other signs in other media) in order to locate the deeper levels of meaning where the primary encounter takes place between the museum and the public. This semiotic attempt to understand is essentially a collaboration with the efforts of museum staff, and its aims and methods have many fruitful points of overlap.

Some semiotic principles relevant to an analysis of this exhibition are:

1. *Communication is always a dynamic interactive event.* So the notorious linear 'bullet theory' of communication (good communication is or should be like a bullet, carefully aimed and fired at its intended targets) is a poor guide to communications

analysis or practice. The present exhibition is designed according to the principles of interactivity, and that is the only basis by which it can be evaluated.

2. *Communication is always a form of social action, constructing identities and relationships as part of its primary work.* In this exhibition, the museum not only projects itself as an ideal communicator, it also constructs and offers roles for the other two major categories of participant: non-Aboriginal visitors as Australian citizens, and Aborigines as both co-presenters of their culture and 'objects' within the exhibition. This social action is itself a major meaning and effect of the exhibition, carried by but distinct from the items that make up the exhibition itself.

3. The contexts of any act of communication are always themselves messages, which form a hierarchy of social meanings reaching up to include the current and previous states of society itself. This exhibition recognises and uses this fact, self-consciously becoming part of a major contemporary debate, which in turn becomes part of the exhibition, with consequences that are important but not always entirely predictable.

4. *Sequence (connection in time or space) is always meaningful and part of every meaning.* Meanings are always packaged in space and time, in stories and sequences. But stories and sequences intended by the designers may not always be what is followed or understood by all visitors, who may create different meanings accidentally or for a variety of reasons. If visitors follow a different order, with the exhibition as a whole or any of its segments, they may miss the meaning and effect of the original design, or create different meanings which may be more or less satisfying to them.

5. *Communication is always multi-semiotic, using many codes, many media for different kinds of user and different purposes.* Sometimes these multiplicities are held together by massive redundancies in which the same message is carried by innumerable instances, but sometimes the multiplicity allows contradictions, intended or not, functional or not, to be managed semiotically, and the range of possibilities is so great that almost always many of them remain invisible to designers and unconscious to visitors.

6. *In any complex act of communication, contradiction is always systemically present.* The existence of contradiction is not bad in itself, as many people suppose. On the contrary it is inevitable. This makes the management of contradiction crucial in every

communication. For instance this exhibition attempts to be both controversial and inviting, marrying the interests of museology and social intervention, serving both Aboriginal Australians and others. The existence of these and many other contradictions or oppositions is not a source of weakness in the exhibition, and its success is not tied in any simple way to its success in concealing or overriding these constitutive contradictions. Identifying the terms of potential contradictions is a key feature of semiotic analysis. It is not in itself a critique of the exhibition, but sets out the terms by which to understand and evaluate it.

The museum as communicator

As a general semiotic principle it can be said that every act of communication constructs an image of the communicator as part of the meaning of the message. In this case, the Indigenous Australian Exhibition communicates important meanings about the Australian Museum (in Australia, in the late 1990s), and in turn the Museum is an intrinsic part of the meaning of the exhibition. This will be true whether or not the Museum is conscious of it, but in this case the Museum is constructively and productively aware.

This can be seen in one quality of reviews of the exhibition I have seen, which were mostly collected by museum staff: nine reviews or reports, all of them highly positive. This positive quality was not an accident, but the product of discursive work by the museum, which ensured its own voice had a respected place in these reviews. In 8 of the 9 reviews, the words and ideas of museum staff are quoted at length with either no comment or positive comments. Of these, the majority quoted the Director, Dr Des Griffin, often in addition to Tim Sullivan and the project team. In this way the reviews became relays of the voice of the Museum (incorporating the project team but including the whole institution as well), putting it into public circulation in a way that carries more credibility than the museum could have achieved speaking in its own voice. The fact that it was the Director who was speaking so eloquently about the Exhibition would have given added force to an identification in the public mind between this particular exhibition and the image of the Museum. Ideas like this tend to circulate in a way that is often impossible to demonstrate but is none the less powerful in its effects. The outcome in this case is likely to have been that the image of the Museum has benefited from the

success of the exhibition, and conversely the exhibition is more successful because of the way the Museum has endorsed it.

All the reviews emphasised one point: the role of consultation with indigenous Australians. This exhibition was ‘shaped in collaboration with many people from indigenous communities around Australia, with the process of consultation being guided by the exhibition team’, as Dr Griffin is quoted in *The View Australia*, Issue 6, 1997, p 36. This is an important meaning of the exhibition, yet in principle it is difficult to signify strongly within the exhibition itself, especially if it is done only through statements made with words. Words are known as *arbitrary* signs: that is, the connection between words and what they signify has no natural basis. For this reason words have relatively weak force and low credibility. As everyone comes to learn, it is easy to make claims in words that have no base in reality.

But fortunately integrity is an undervalued but reliable semiotic resource. In practice the project team has indeed consulted widely and seriously with Indigenous communities, and this work shows this through many unobtrusive but persuasive signs which are *motivated*, that is, they have a significant connection with the reality they are about. As just one instance, there is a notice at the beginning of the exhibition which explains that the museum has made every effort not to display secret sacred materials, while inviting any indigenous person who is offended to inform the museum staff.

Figure 1: Constructing the exhibition: small writing on a big theme, a temporary feel for a timeless culture

The motivated sign here is not the words in themselves but the speech act itself, the offer that is being made by the museum to indigenous communities to continue to exert their rights over this material. Non-Aboriginal visitors will draw on their cultural knowledge to judge that this unlimited offer would be unusual in their own social interactions, so they see with their very eyes as it were a transaction taking place which constructs an image of the museum (as an infinitely scrupulous custodian of knowledge) and Indigenous people (as uniquely vulnerable custodians). It may be noted that ‘motivated signs’ are neither pure reality nor pure truth. It is possible to construct an

image of this kind in a manipulative way, to give the impression of extreme scrupulousness, and equally it is possible to be scrupulous and not to show it. But as this exhibition demonstrates, when the integrity is there, many of the signs are likely to take care of themselves.

Almost all the reviews were specifically aware of a major meta-sign of the exhibition, reconciliation. Sonya Voumard in the Qantas Inflight magazine, for instance, praised the 'close consultation with Aboriginal groups over two years' as a selling point of the exhibition for her readers, many of them tourists and potential visitors to the museum. She then addressed a particular worry that they might have had: 'Museum staff were mindful that being too "confronting" about the tragic events in Aboriginal history could turn visitors off.' (1997: 107). Finally she quoted the Director: the exhibition 'does what reconciliation should do - recognise the wrongs of the past, acknowledge those wrongs and injustices and try to move forward in a new way with Aboriginal people.' (1997:109).

Again some of these meanings will be invisible to visitors, unless they are specifically told about the extensive consultation process. Indigenous Australians were available for visitors' questions, and I observed some very positive interactions between some performers and some of the visitors, and these features of the exhibition would have been an excellent and convincing means for communicating this meaning. Beyond this, in the time it has been open most visitors would have heard of the reconciliation process. The pre-visit survey suggests as much, where 69% said they believed that knowledge of Aborigines had improved, and 60% knew that Aboriginal children had been taken from their families. The exhibition included within it a reminder of the apology issued by the NSW State government. In these and other ways the exhibition connected its display with a major public debate, so that the exhibition itself became as Dr Griffin claimed, recognisable and significant as a clear and strong position on a matter of intense political debate.

This position, as Voumard points out, is a compromise, a contradiction, mediating between honesty about the painful truths of the past without being 'confronting'. The semiotic point to make about this is that this concern is not simply something that happened or not behind the scenes, in the minds of the people planning the exhibition. It

continues to be a major meaning, the key to its importance and success (if it works as Dr Griffin claimed) or the reason for its failure (if it is perceived as too confronting by some, or going soft by others).

There is one complication of this situation: that exactly the same exhibit might be seen by some as too confronting and by others as too soft. But that cannot be avoided. It is the normal state of social meanings, more prominent the more important are the meanings. This is a general principle of social meanings, that where meaning is a site of struggle the core set of signs (words, meanings, other signs) will have a systematic duality within them. This means that the ideal that some may dream of, to create an exhibition which everyone interprets and responds to in the same (positive) way, is in principle impossible. The project team did the best that can be done about this situation through the design of its front-end evaluation, by testing out its own best guesses (as well-informed and reflective members of mainstream Australian society) on three focus groups, 'families' (presumably normal visitors), Indigenous people (randomly chosen, though presumably with a bias towards urban and better educated people because of the difficulties that would have faced any attempt at a genuinely random sample) and teachers (of Indigenous studies programs, likely therefore to be especially well informed about the content of the Exhibition, representatives of well-informed and educated non-Aboriginal Australians). These three groups are constructed around the two sets of binaries which are likely to produce the main systemic differences of interpretation: social class (reflected in level of education, educators versus 'normal' members of the public) and Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Of course, there are divisions in each of these groups, and divisions within the divisions, but these normally will follow the same principles.

In this case, the Indigenous Australian reference group is likely to have been predominantly urban-influenced community leaders, with the same relation to grass roots Aboriginal semiotics as the teachers had to members of the public. One review by an Indigenous Australian, the Tasmanian Julie Gough, complained about the effect of putting artefacts from different peoples and places together in one case as an example of 'the danger of unintentionally reapplying the dangerous postmodern homogenisation principle, implying that Indigenous (in fact all) people are one manageable, accountable,

palatable, non-threatening predictable mass to external governing bodies' (1997:10). It is likely that many other Indigenous people would object to this unitary construction of them, and the elision of the differences between especially the traditional cultures, whereas the unifying symbols of contemporary activism (the Freedom bus, the Stolen Children issue) would be far more acceptable. Even so, Gough was mainly positive about the exhibition, and she was probably speaking for many others like her. But how would remote Aborigines respond? The question probably does not arise strongly at the moment because these people would not be likely to come in large numbers. But how about some future time, if the Museum seeks an outreach approach?

Similarly, non-Aboriginal visitors are a category that could be divided along the same lines. There is a large proportion of Australians who are not museum goers and in many cases (the 'Hanson constituency') would not share the relatively positive attitudes to Aborigines and reconciliation that can be sufficiently taken for granted in the design of the exhibition.

This kind of analysis can be very productive for certain purposes, in challenging settled ideas in the minds of the planners and in beginning to second-guess the reactions that a relatively (and in some senses a significantly) excluded group of interpreters might come up with, if they were to be persuaded to attend the exhibition (which in many cases might first require them to visit the Museum for the first time). On the one hand, this might be something that the Museum would want to consider if it really took on board Dr Griffin's challenge, to mirror the full scope of the national Reconciliation project, which in order to succeed needs also to bring in the Hansonists and disaffected and dispossessed and/or remote Aborigines.

To begin to make this exhibition address this task, planning would have to go back to square one, with the further difficulty that an exhibition which tried to bring in this (at the moment) unresolved conflictual diversity in the Australian cultural semiotic would risk losing the effective cohesion that at the moment it possesses, precisely because it has not tried to include the view-points and values of the whole of Australia.

What it has done instead is to stay within its normal clientele, highly educated members of mainstream society, and add one set of perspectives (relatively 'mainstream' Indigenous Australians). This can be well justified, in this instance, as respecting the

limits of the possible. One pre-visit survey, for instance, found that 90% of these visitors had not come especially to see the Indigenous Australian exhibition. This shows that in spite of the effective (but low-cost) publicity strategies taken by the Museum, the word had not got out in a compelling fashion. The survey also found that of these visitors, the 'spontaneous' audience for the exhibition, 77% had some form of tertiary qualification, with 28% having some postgraduate qualification. These figures suggest that the Museum at the moment is not speaking or being listened to by a full cross-section of the Australian populace. This means that it would be foolish to construct an exhibition around a diversity of meaning systems and values of people who will not in fact come or want to come to activate their own preferred signs and meanings. It made more sense to communicate primarily with typical museum-goers, and use the exhibition to stretch their understanding of the issues involved, and that is what this exhibition has primarily tried to do.

Beginnings and ends

Every communication is accompanied by a special class of signs called meta-signs, signs which provide instructions to other communicators about the communication itself. Every communicator provides orientations to others, conditioning them to expectations and judgements and outcomes. This class of sign is normally continuous, but it is typically more dense at beginnings and ends: at beginnings so that others may have the right set to what is being communicated, at ends so that they can be told what meanings they ought to have had.

That said, it can then be asked: where is the beginning, and where is the end? In the case of this exhibition there are two obvious candidates as the beginning: the approach to the exhibition up a ramp from the floor of the foyer or large hall, and the first stretch of the first section, just inside the door that opens into the exhibition proper. But before visitors get there are at least two other beginnings: the entrance to the Museum itself, and the entrance sequence. I presume the Museum staff are aware of some of the problems with this public face of the Museum since they are relatively obvious, but it may be that they have not been factored into the design of the exhibition, since they are what can't be changed, a background so intractable to any new act of communication that it cannot be changed and should not be thought on.

However, this set of meanings are nonetheless meanings, which weave into the meanings of the exhibition itself. Visitors who approach the Museum from the street come with their expectations and memories about the Museum, and the Museum speaks to them about its present self through the impression it makes. From the outside, the building presents a traditional face, signifying a traditional approach to the Museum's role. There are large areas of sandstone but no grand entrance, unlike the Art Gallery of NSW, so what is signified is the inability or reluctance to make a grand statement or claim about its importance. There are no large public signs to indicate that something like the Indigenous Australian Exhibition is happening inside or that it is an integral part of its current new image and identity.

The areas before the Exhibition starts carry similar messages (the lack of a message is itself a message). What is missing from these spaces is not simply indications of the existence of this exhibition, but any sense of the orientation that it involves (a concern with 'public communication', a readiness on the part of the Museum to be controversial and to lead and challenge public opinion, to produce what Dr Griffin called 'excited minds' in one Annual Report (1996-7).

Along the right hand wall leading to the Exhibition there are cases displaying artefacts to commemorate ones that have been returned to their original owners, and this is a low-key but effective signifier of the new attitudes of the new Museum. It is a good start, but otherwise there is nothing else to provide an orientation to the attitudes the Museum wishes to construct in relation to the Indigenous Australian Exhibition, no allusion to its macro-function as stated in its mission, 'to increase understanding of, and influence public debate on, the natural environment, human societies and human interaction with the environment'. Almost the sole representatives of 'human societies' as objects to be understood or debated in the Museum at the time of my observations (February - May, 1998) were the Indigenous Australians. Their exhibition, however, was off to the right hand side, approached by a ramp which lead off from a passage that led downwards towards the toilets, while immediately in front, in a dominating central location, were large notices for the 'Spiders' exhibition.

Without labouring the point further, it is easy to see that more could have been done to signify the Museum's mission in general, and the significant, even exemplary

role played in it by the new Indigenous Australian exhibition. As this Exhibition moves into the ambiguity of a 'semi-permanent' exhibition this problem is likely to become worse, as Museum staff know that it is there but don't draw attention to it anymore, and new visitors simply don't know it exists. The Museum may wish to consider seriously how it is going to signify its concern with living forms of 'human society' in general, and Aboriginal Australia in particular, as something that is structural to its mission

As the tracking study shows, the three exhibits in the 'orientating' phase (along the ramp, with a set of Pukumani poles, a row of unnamed photographs of contemporary Aborigines, and a ritual Headdress) attracted a high level of attention, as did the first notice visitors saw when they entered the exhibition space proper. This indicates that they were doing their job as orientaters. This does not necessarily mean that they were more successful than some later items with lower scores, because items in this position can be expected to attract attention because people are scanning them for orientation messages.

The fact that there were only three primary orienters is likely to have simplified the task for visitors. Since they would have been read to gain a sense of what the following exhibition was about, their choice is especially important. In this case, two of the exhibits were 'traditional' signifiers of Aboriginality and the traditional Museum: attractive and exotic artefacts displayed outside the contexts of their traditional use and meaning. The third element was the series of photographs of people of varying degrees of Aboriginal descent, all in European clothes, with no names attached. Together they are an adequate microcosm of what the exhibition will contain, a balance between traditional and contemporary, spirituality and a positive approach to social justice.

These three orientaters carry the main burden of introducing the Exhibition. There is no orientation to the orientation, no clear announcement that this journey (the walk up the ramp) is significant, or what it is significant of. As indicated above, such an introduction might have added to the effect of the Exhibition, but what is there is still successful in its own way. The most intriguing and risky of the three is the photographs, and the fact that these are not ostentatiously 'Aboriginal' people (marked off by nakedness etc.) but portraits in the European tradition, gazing directly at the viewers not passive objects of the visitors' gaze, self-confident but unnamed people.

The withholding of the names (to be revealed later on, when they are encountered in the exhibition itself) is itself an interesting and productive strategy. Roughly half the visitors (according to the pre-visit survey) can be expected to be overseas tourists, who could look at these unnamed faces and suppose that these must be famous in their own country. The other half, the core category of Museum visitor (White, middle-class, well educated) would be even more challenged, by a series of photographs of Aboriginal people they seem to be assumed to know but in most cases probably do not. For these people the effect is like beginning the exhibition by failing what seems to be an elementary test. Julie Gough in her insightful review puts it like this: 'By not recognising people who are obviously important and respected, it is the visitor who is cast into self-doubt and forced to reflect on the fallibility of their own knowledge base' (1997:11)

Telling a story

Order always produces meaning. In the case of the semiotics of museums, the normal order is a combination of chronology and taxonomy, signifying history as an underlying constant or the power and truth of the dominant classification scheme. In the case of this exhibition, however, the planners designed it around specific themes, arranged to take account of typical visitor responses in order to build up to an overall response to the intended meaning and effect of the Exhibition.

The team's description of the Front-End evaluation (Sullivan and Kelly 1996) explains a process by which the main themes were posed and refined until they became the headings for the different sections of the exhibition, but not much is said about how the specific order was settled on. An important moment as reported in this study was the team's response to the divergent responses of the three focus groups, especially between the Indigenous groups, who found the exhibition 'insufficiently hard hitting', and the family group, who found it 'too hard hitting, too "blaming", too confronting' (1996:10). The team resolved to address this problem by a number of means, including spreading the more 'confronting' material more evenly through the exhibition, and strengthening the 'stolen children' section.

The exhibition itself shows other strategies for coping with and incorporating this core problem (the problem of managing the contradictions between the two different groups for whom the exhibition was meant to appeal). The route the visitor is intended to

follow is tightly prescribed, as a journey which begins at a point close to the middle of the long rectangle, and follows a rainbow serpent motif in the carpet along a narrow path to the left which loops round to return to a point nearly opposite the entrance. It then continues through a maze and along a wall to loop back to the entrance again. The order is insistently signalled. It is part of the meaning of the exhibition, and constructs a specific experience which requires a particular order for the visitor to follow.

Figure 2: Art & artefacts, ancient and modern: presenting a seamless culture

However, in many ways this continuous loop breaks down into a story of two halves. Between the left loop and the right loop there is a large open space which acts as a punctuation mark. The left loop has a consistent feel to it, produced by its thematic concerns ('spirituality' and culture), by its format (relatively uncluttered exhibits), and by the characteristic way it puts contradictions together. So for instance, a large open space to the left contains a reconstructed cave with an Aboriginal story teller available on audio, and two manifestations of Aboriginal spirituality, traditional images of the Rainbow serpent (in both traditional bark painting, and modern acrylics) facing mementos of the Christian influence. Around the corner there is a large reconstructed bush chapel, with a small number of acrylic paintings: again, a seamless marriage of Aboriginal and European traditions.

Figure 3: Space and time to think: the Rainbow Serpent space

The overall meaning of the way these images are composed and juxtaposed is the harmonious reconciliation of Indigenous and European cultures. The individual exhibits do not compete with each other. The lavish use of space (with the children's game on the carpet) is itself a signifier of tranquillity. The loop follows a chronological sequence, with momentos of Yothu Yindi and hot news from the archaeological front in the form of diaries from the Jinmium team towards the end. The highly contemporary issue of copyright is also represented. So themes of social justice are not absent, but presented in a non-confrontational way. The whole of the first loop can be characterised as a journey

from past to present in which Spirituality is an ever present thread that harmonises and resolves all contradictions.

Figure 4: Beginning again: the ambiguous punctuation of the performance room

The second loop begins in the open performance space, which feels like a new beginning, preparing for a new way of viewing what is almost a new exhibition, a new stance for the viewer which is at the same time a different construction. The first loop constructs the spiritual sensibility of an informed aesthete: the second constructs the moral perspective of a materialist activist. Along two walls an Aboriginal style of art is used to depict the history of Aboriginal people in European Australia. The theme of the family, represented by children's toys, is interesting and attractive, but it is not a substantial moment, and it tends to act more as a contrasting frame for the entrance to the Maze painted by Kevin Butler around the theme of the Stolen Children.

The Maze is a powerful statement, and the loop to the right continues in this vein. There are some elements of traditional society at peace, such as the 'Goomadee Dreaming' painted on a reconstructed wall and the bush plants, but the main theme is carried through powerful images of Indigenous Australian suffering (the brass name plates, the cell) or heroic struggle (the Freedom Bus).

The aim of the team was to finish with a positive note, and that is the label the Exhibition finishes with: 'the Future', and some strong statements by Indigenous Australian leaders. But the final section becomes more verbal than earlier sections, and the route followed to the end is a narrow and cluttered path. The only relief that is offered is the 'Freedom bus', a reconstructed cell, or a dock in which the central experience to be identified with is Aboriginal criminality, under which ever system of law. There is a strong contrast with what is offered in the first loop: a space between Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality in which a children's game is there to be played, and an inexplicably spacious and sparsely ornamented bush chapel.

The Tracking Study carried out by Clara Luxford for the Museum Evaluation Unit came up with data that has interesting implications in the light of this analysis. Firstly it showed that there was one popular aberrant route that went to the climax of the

exhibition, 'Social Justice', immediately after section 3. For these people, the Maze was the climax. Clearly this shows that the performance space in section 4 was not directing people to the maze as remorselessly as was intended, but the other point to make is that this other route made good sense, since the whole of the right hand loop was concerned with 'Social Justice' as its predominant meaning, which the 'Spirituality' loop had prepared well for. The Stolen Children theme refers to events that took place over this century, but the issue as such is as hot and topical as anything in the 'Social Justice' section. So the right hand loop (and hence the Exhibition) had two alternative endings or climaxes: the 'Social Justice' section and the 'maze'. Each of these was therefore either an introduction to a loop or a climax, and each in fact was able to function well in either role. So the fact that these two routes coexisted was not a defect but a happy accident, whose success is worth reflecting on.

Clara Luxford reported that the Social Justice section worked well as a climax, and that attention picked up during it. However, of her bottom 20 exhibits in terms of numbers of stops, 10 were from section 6, ie 50%. These tended to be information-exhibits, text panels, AVs or interactive computers etc, but the figures still suggest that as a climax this one was not entirely successful.

The Maze, however, was successful by all the indicators. Visitors' comments often singled it out for praise. The Tracking Study showed that it was highly successful: the star of the 'Family' section, with 47 stops, equal sixth over-all. The majority of reviews also gave it a positive mention. It is useful then to ask why it worked so well, and what can be learnt from its success.

Semiotically its characteristics are:

1. It is an *experience*. The experience is the translation into a bodily performance of the metaphor of a maze, whereas the cell for instance gives part of the experience of incarceration. But precisely for this reason it has a special power, because it recreates a feeling or state of mind which accompanies the Aboriginal experience of what it describes, whereas the cell only gives the physical context in which the experience occurred, leaving the state of mind to be imagined. That is not to discount the value of the other more direct forms of experience, which are amongst the most effective parts of the exhibition.

2. It expresses an *Indigenous Australian voice*. This again is something it shares with other successful exhibits, and is one of the important features of the exhibition overall, in fulfilling its aim to construct an image of reconciliation. In this case, the voice is contained in written form, which is not so common in this Exhibition. Elsewhere Indigenous Australians speak in video or audio displays at the touch of a button, which is a welcome feature of the Exhibition. But this results in the possibility of ‘cacophany’, too many voices competing with each other, and some visitors experienced this negative effect. Kevin Butler’s voice was silent but almost inescapable, as brief, passionate statements complemented by the strong images he constructed.

3. This economy of voice was possible because he was also speaking through a *visual language, using artistic resources*. The use of visual images created by Indigenous Australians, traditional and contemporary, to communicate meanings not just as objects of uncomprehending contemplation, was another generally effective device throughout the Exhibition.

4. Because he was drawing on the resources of Indigenous Australian art, which has fused contemporary and traditional forms and meanings, spirituality and material concerns, he is able to blend *a spiritual perspective with a passionate and powerful concern with social justice*. These are the two categories of material which the designers of the Exhibition worked so hard to do justice to in a balanced way. Kevin Butler’s Maze successfully managed the integration of the two themes.

5. The Maze communicated a complex situation in the *form of a story*. Telling stories is antithetical to the normal language of museums, in which taxonomic or chronological order is fundamental, but it is a primary way in which knowledge is transmitted in Indigenous Australian culture, contemporary as well as traditional. Aboriginal speakers in the videos also tell stories, and for non-Aboriginal people as well these stories communicate complex meanings powerfully and effectively.

6. The form of the Maze has a *mythic dimension*. The Rainbow serpent is a central figure in Indigenous Australian mythology and ritual. As the historical mural in the Performance space depicts the whole of post-contact history as a progression through a Rainbow serpent. The images of serpents in the carpets are cues for a progression through the Exhibition which has its own significance as a journey which is a kind of rite

of passage. The entrance to the Exhibition itself, along the ramp which is open along one side, is followed by a narrow passage which opens out into a larger space where the Rainbow Serpent is celebrated. The rhythm of expansions and contractions, narrow stretches and open spaces, is a feature of the exhibition which gives a mythic resonance to the exhibition as a whole. In terms of this significant progression, the Maze is positioned as either the central point or (for one set of aberrant readers) as the climax. In either position the serpentine quality of the Maze and the meanings it contains work well. The narrow, cluttered passage that characterises most of the final section 6 does not give the same sense of ritual significance or emotional release. Butler's Maze gives a better sense of rebirth, but for many reasons it is probably better where it is, in the centre of the exhibition. So triumphantly claustrophobic a central moment arguably deserves a more cathartic moment of release.

The Museum Corporate Strategic Plan sees a high importance to the physical experience aspect of an Exhibition, and gives three questions:

- 'Does it engender respect for audiences, their needs and the content?
- Does it astonish the senses and excite the visitor's mind?
- Is it a unique experience?'

Kevin Butler's Maze does all three. It is undoubtedly unique. It astonishes the senses and excites the mind. And its structure isolates individuals giving them time to experience it alone, as each individual Indigenous Australian experiences initiation alone. It is also the sole route to the next section of the exhibition, so I imagine that it does not have this effect when there are large parties of tourists or school students passing through it. But this is a problem which can surely be overcome. Apart from this problem, it is clear that this part of the Exhibition deserves all the praise it has received, and maybe more.

The Curatorial voice

One of the distinctive features of this Exhibition is its attempt to incorporate Indigenous Australian voices, to construct or allow a dialogue within the walls of the Exhibition itself. As Dr Griffin is quoted as saying, in Voumard's review: 'Griffin says "Indigenous Australians" puts aside the museum "voice", allowing, as much as possible, the Aboriginal voice to come through.

“The time when the curatorial voice could be dominant in presenting the history of various cultures of which we are not a part is long past,” he says. “History should not simply focus on the ‘winners’ but should incorporate the many interpretations of ordinary people’s own experiences.” (Voumard 1997: 109).

Gough as an Indigenous Australian commentator commends this approach: ‘it is refreshing that there isn’t the usual omniscient, non-Indigenous curatorial voice speaking for Aboriginal Australia’ (1997:10). But in her praise for this feature of the Exhibition Gough draws attention to what is also a problem with this strategy from another point of view and set of values. There is, she says: ‘a cacophony of voice-sound reverberating around the gallery - both disquieting and cancelling each other out.’ (1997:11). She finishes her review with a positive interpretation of it: ‘the endless repetition of stories and ungraspable conglomeration of artefacts that *is* this exhibit, is actually the Aboriginal way of seeing time and presence...If as visitor you see a gap, feel confused, it is telling you to do something about your learning and perception in your own way.’ (1997:13).

The problem is that for many other visitors, the non-Indigenous majority, this response was not available. The Visitors Comments for the 6 month period after the Exhibition opened are frequently critical of this feature. Even many who were positive overall were critical of this feature, and only criticism of the size and legibility of the labels was more frequent. (Eg. ‘Aboriginal exhibit wonderful - the sounds are all competing and it is hard to concentrate’ (13/04/97); About “Indigenous Australians:” - Your exhibition is too noisy, far too noisy...I would like More information, more facts, and less moral summation.’ (31/08/97); ‘The “Indigenous Australians” exhibit was excellent but I found the different TV’s distraction as one was trying to read what the displays said. Sound booths might work to block off the voices unless you actually wanted to hear them. Otherwise, wonderful museum!’ (12/09/97)).

The problem is a complex one, involving different codes which are ambiguously marked for Indigeneity. ‘Cacophony’ seems like mere noise, especially to the middle-aged, middle class people who make up the bulk of the Museum’s regular clientele. When it is mediated via contemporary technology it seems something European, not Indigenous, so there is no incentive to make allowances for cultural difference. It is likely

to seem like ‘the Museum’s fault’, an error the Museum ought to correct. Nor is ‘cacophony’ a particular feature of traditional Aboriginal social life.

Figure 5: A visual cacophony

However, acceptance of the diversity of Aboriginal voices in contemporary Australia is now an important value for Aboriginal people, and the multiplicity of voices on each video expresses this value well. Only one of these voices speaks at any one time at any one station, depending on which has been selected. The videos are in separate places, and as far as I could judge (testing them at a time when the crowds were small) the voices did not carry into adjacent areas. So this is a complaint that is consistent enough to be taken seriously, but it could not quite mean what it seems to.

One possible explanation might be that there is a class of museum-goer who attends exclusively to visual displays and written texts, for whom *any* voice in a museum is a disruption of what is an essentially solitary and silent experience. (Clara Luxford noticed a tendency like this, for visitors to remain with a particular kind of exhibit, whether artefacts, written materials or interactive computers). If this is the case, then the controlled multiplicity of voices should remain, but some form of communication is needed to explain to such people how important is the theme of voices, and how central they are to the core themes and purposes of the Exhibition.

The aim of the project team was not to remove the curatorial voice entirely, but simply to ‘create a space where Indigenous people can express, explain, talk about their lives and experiences’, and the Videos especially help them to do that, in a way that was clearly welcomed by a majority of visitors. The curatorial voice remains, and it has a role. If there is to be reconciliation it needs dialogue, and dialogue needs more than one speaker. So the ‘curatorial voice’ was not and should not have been silenced, in terms of this aim of the Exhibition. However, there are different ways the ‘curatorial voice’ can be expressed, which construct different forms of dialogue, and different versions of the Museum itself in relation to its public and its content.

One expression of the curatorial voice is the labels that organise the different sections of the Exhibition. There are six of these, which correspond to the Themes

identified by the Project team in its Front-End evaluation. Initially the Team began with a larger list of ten themes, which were tested on various groups to see how they rated them, and the bottom three were dropped ('Reconciliation', 'World issues', 'Self-Government'). In this process of consultation, these words seemed to function effectively between the Museum and the three focus groups. However, it is not necessarily the case that different groups understand the same thing by the same word, especially across cultural differences. When these words were then used as main headings for particular sections of the Exhibition, there is further scope for slippage. There were many instances where the location of a particular item seemed almost arbitrary. For instance 'Land' inevitably contained items that were part of the cultural heritage, as did 'Family'. This looseness of categories meant that the 'curatorial voice' was not giving clear guidance as to what was in each section.

Figure 6: The complex meanings of land

However, these headings were typically transformed into a question: 'What is family?' 'Why is cultural heritage/land important?' 'What is social justice?'. These are basically the thematic labels turned into a kind of question, and the effect is in some ways strange. To ask 'What is family?' sounds naive or didactic. The curatorial voice becomes like a primary school or kindergarten teacher, constructing the visitors as young children, ignorant of some of the most basic of concepts. Since as surveys show, the bulk of these are highly educated mature people, the tone is clearly inappropriate. It is not clear that it is even appropriate for parties of school children with their teachers, who are another staple audience. The teachers can surely be left to adopt this kind of didactic tone.

The specific labels on exhibits were frequently complained of in the visitors' book, and the criticism is clearly justified. The print size was too small with individual cases, and insufficiently legible. Almost without exception the notices were not large enough for their purpose, and too wordy. The Tracking study showed how little most of the Text Panels were attended to, after the opening orientation section. Like the 'curatorial voice' itself, the museum needs to provide information in words, but it needs to be more strategic.

If the labelling was in general a failure, the use of interactive computer displays was a success, as a way of communicating further information to active inquirers. These were not highly used, according to the Tracking study, but that is not to be expected. They provide this opportunity for motivated visitors with enough time to engage with them. According to the post-visit survey, only 11% said they used a computer, compared to 26% who said they read (and 16% who watched videos). But this relatively low rate of use is not a problem in the same way as the labelling is, since the poor labelling interrupts the flow of the Exhibition, whereas the Interactive computers are an optional enrichment.

The final element in the 'curatorial voice' concerns the displays of artefacts. In terms of semiotics artefacts are elements in a form of language which has been especially closely associated with the traditional 'curatorial voice', which commonly defines itself by the ways it speaks through and about artefacts. The Director in his introduction to the 1998-2001 Corporate Strategic Plan made this pronouncement in relation to the Museum: 'Although holding collections uniquely distinguishes museums...it does not define the business of museums. Museums will succeed in their public communication - their real business - by the unique ways in which they join their knowledge to peoples' understandings' (1998:1). Implicit in this statement is a potential dilemma, between a responsibility to the collections, primarily of artefacts or objects, and a role as a public communicator. The dilemma arises because the messages and meanings a Museum may believe are most urgently needed to be disseminated and debated by the public might not be best communicated by means of artefactual communication in general, and the artefacts and objects in its collections in particular.

Figure 7: Representing Social Justice

The project team describes the care with which objects were selected, and the way in which the criteria for selection blended the two considerations: their role in the communication process, and their place in the museum's collection. Sullivan and Kelly describe how the Front-End Evaluation Process 'streamlined the selection of objects - more than 600 have been chosen, linked tightly to the interpretive strategies. The objects selected represent a cross-section of the Museum's collection: the objects are typically

richly coloured and engraved, and drawn from many regions in Australian. There will be archaeological material which will add depth to the timescale'. (1996:9).

This statement shows the care the Team took to balance the two functions: to do justice to the breadth of the Museum's collection, and to mount an attractive and challenging exhibition. But in spite of this care, there is a potential conflict. 600 objects may be a small proportion compared to the total collection, but it is still a large amount for visitors to take in and understand and assimilate into a challenging and educative experience. In practice, many of these are indeed richly coloured and engraved, attractive in their own right, but most of them still do not communicate fully on their own, detached from their original contexts. Without supporting text, or experience, artefacts often do not speak their culture.

This exhibition resolves this dilemma by including many of these objects in glass cases. As Sullivan and Kelly indicate, these are carefully selected, high quality items for the judicious visitor. The Tracking Study shows that some of these did attract attention, but others were barely looked at. As the visitors comment book indicates, the labelling was inadequate in quality, but even if it had been adequate there would still have been a problem in integrating the meanings carried by many of the artefacts with the meanings identified as relevant to the aims of the exhibition.

There were many exhibits which showed how the two purposes could be combined. Outstanding was the set of brass name plates, aesthetically interesting as objects and speaking their history dramatically to visitors with minimal preparation. These were highly popular, and deservedly so. The Pukumani poles and the Mornington Island Headdress were also popular and successful, as was the set of children's toys. The first two were sufficiently exotic to seem to communicate in their own right, while the toys were engagingly familiar. The crucial point in common was that the visitor did not need extensive notes in either case.

The curatorial voice, then, takes many forms in this exhibition. This gives a greater range than is the case in a more traditional exhibition, allowing the Museum to be a more dynamic communicator, but this range opens up the possibility of an uncertain and inconsistent tone which at times is destabilising to visitors. There is a tendency with the glass cases for them to function mainly outside the main message, with a different

function, to reassure Museum visitors that in spite of the highly contemporary meanings and debates they are engaged in, they are still in a Museum, and moreover an excellent one. That may seem to be a contradictory message, but the two halves of it do not necessarily cancel each other out. Visitors to so challenging an exhibition need many forms of reassurance, and the rows of glass cases (especially if they were slightly more streamlined, and better labelled) may help to provide it.

Conclusion

This report has been highly selective in the elements it has discussed, in order to focus especially on the most difficult and most important task the Museum has posed for itself: the task of creating an Exhibition which will bring more Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, closer together in a spirit of reconciliation. If some of the comments are critical, that is only a recognition of just how difficult is this task, and they are intended to be positive and constructive in their effect. I commend the Project Team and the Museum for undertaking so valuable and ambitious a job with such success.

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