



Awe and Contemplation

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Why did I go to Melbourne to visit the festival this year? The Melbourne International Arts Festival was held 11–27 October with the usual mix of dance, film, music, theatre and visual arts. There was no shortage of powerful theatre—the religion of culture festivals—but there was less presence of the visual arts.

Last year the Festival presented a number of high profile visual art exhibitions, including the 2006 *Contemporary Commonwealth* at the National Gallery of Victoria, as well as *9 Films* by William Kentridge, and *Game on: Contemporary Sport and Art* at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, along with other smaller exhibitions concurrent with the Commonwealth Games, perhaps a reflection of the perceived admiration for sport in Australia (evident in the one-off government funding for that year). Did those events provide an effective component in a festival of visual arts? Should there be something more impressive, something in tune with the festival's aim to show “the best” that there is in the arts?

Often the Festival director (in this case Kristy Edmunds) demonstrates a preference for the performing arts and it's fair to say that not every festival offers a strong visual arts section. The 2007 Sydney Festival listed only two visual art exhibitions in its calendar—*Centre Pompidou Video Art 1965* at the Museum of Contemporary Art and *Junk Theory*, seen in and around the Sydney Harbour area. These were thoughtful exhibitions but wouldn't normally be deemed ‘crowd pullers’. They appeared to coincide with the Festival rather than forming an integral part of it. For example, the extraordinary exhibition *Goddess: Devine Energy* had opened at the Art Gallery of New South Wales three months earlier in October 2006, but remained open during the Festival.

The 2007 Melbourne International Arts Festival was built around a strongly determined theme of the impact upon the arts by modernist hero, Merce Cunningham, one of the most innovative and influential dancers and choreographers of the twentieth-century. The Festival used his contribution to dance history to highlight, with Cunningham as catalyst, the many connections between art disciplines. This multidisciplinary approach was fundamental to Cunningham's work—he launched his career in partnership with composer John Cage. This interaction between art forms was also the signature feature of teaching at Black Mountain College where both

Cunningham and Cage taught, influencing many pop artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Claus Oldenburg, and Allan Kaprow, to match art with performances in ‘happenings’, and collaborations with dancers and musicians, as well as providing an example to minimalists such as Robert Morris who worked with the Judson Dance Company.

The set that Jasper Johns designed for Cunningham's dance *Walkaround Time*, was displayed at the National Gallery of Victoria, as an example of this kind of interaction and co-operation between artists. *Collaborations*, a suite of films screened at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, provided documentation of the performances generated when Cunningham and Cage worked together and with other artists. A re-presentation of an Andy Warhol performance *The Cloud Party*, as further evidence of artistic synergies, was backed by the musicians Slave Pianos. Photographs by Gabriel Orozco, Christian Marclay, Chuck Close, William Eggleston, Olafur Eliasson, Candida Höfer, Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman and others who contributed work to support the Cunningham Dance Company, were exhibited at the Centre for Contemporary Photography.

These and other presentations picked up on ideas inspired by Cunningham's genius, in positioning artists as a fulcrum for crossovers in music, dance or performance. No doubt an excellent strategy, yet overall the Festival, at least the visual arts, lacked substance and ‘oomph’. These Cunningham-inspired exhibitions simply were sideshows to theatre and dance; there was no major visual art exhibition that might be considered central to the Festival.

It may be that visual arts are not considered vital to any degree of success to an arts festival, given that it is on show all year at designated galleries and the NGV has an aggressively marketed annual program. Additionally, ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions have long lead times and would have to be put in place several years in advance. In terms of an annual Festival this is problematic given uncertain budgets and changing Festival operations.

Visual art exhibitions, certainly major presentations, are costly to mount and are rarely subsidised by (Melbourne) Festival funding, the underlying assumption being that the NGV can afford such expenditure and will recover its costs anyway. Nor is the longer duration of a visual art exhibition (several months or more) generally associated with the short-sharp season of a Festival. The difficulty of matching the themes of a major exhibition with those of the Festival, given differing lead times and often differing sensibilities, can force an issue of dominance—should the visual arts component follow the Festival theme or lead it?

Adelaide has incorporated the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* as part of each Festival program since 1990. This may be due to its Festival being bi-annual that the planning process is able to accommodate a stronger relationship between a major visual arts presentation and the Festival proper. More likely, it is the Festival's determination to include the visual arts from the beginning of its formation, coupled with a need to maximise budget limitations that make for the prominence of this signature visual arts exhibition in the city's cultural calendar.

The Perth International Arts Festival incorporates an annual exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. This year's Festival included *Raised by Wolves*, a response by AGWA to the overarching theme of *The Human Family*. Soon after the 2005 Festival, AGWA mounted the exhibition *St. Petersburg 1900* with the local orchestra and theatres working together with the Gallery in presenting Russian music and plays from the period. This mini-season of Russian art reflected well on all participants—the visual art exhibition dominated and set the background for the moment. Would there be many festival directors modest enough to adopt such a model?

Perth and Adelaide seem to be the exceptions in giving a prominence to the visual arts in multi-arts festivals. There are few alternatives, with dedicated major visual arts events in Australia being a rarity. Excluding major exhibitions such as the *Biennial of Sydney*, the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* and the new *Contemporary Indigenous Triennial*, there is only *Fotofreo*, a Perth based national photography exhibition, and little else. *Vivid*, interestingly billed as the first national photography exhibition, is being planned for June 2008 in Canberra as a one-off event.

In 2007, the Melbourne International Arts Festival was launched with a visionary idea and with great ambition. Themed to coincide with a residency in Melbourne by the celebrated master Merce Cunningham, the Festival umbrella included artists who worked with dance or performance, making ideal connections to logically illustrate, extend and connect all the arts in this multi arts arena. Cunningham in this sense, might be seen as the patron saint of cultural festivals. Certainly this theme presented organisers with a great opportunity, namely to illustrate the synergies between arts disciplines.

Given that the historical partnership between Cunningham and Cage (and other artists) spanned from the 1940s to the present and paralleled the emergence and flourishing of creativity in and around New York and the triumph of internationalising of American art, it is a pity that the Guggenheim exhibition at the NGV ended *before* the Festival started. It did present a picture of poor timing



and perhaps a lack of communication between the Festival organisers and the Gallery. It would have been a more impressive Festival and a more cogent exhibition if the two had coincided, and there had been greater opportunities to realise connections.

Timing for planning, developing and programming of festival events generally occurs at least a year ahead, with certain substantial events additionally planned for the year after. As in any art gallery context, there is the perennial search for sponsorship to extend meagre budgets to match the ambitions of a major festival. The Melbourne Festival has received annual funding of \$2.5million per annum for more than a decade, but there has never been a guarantee of long term funding until late 2004 when the Victorian Government committed additional funds, taking the annual budget up to \$5.5million over four years, so that events could be booked well in advance. This is not to suggest that the government allocation is anywhere near sufficient. According to Fergus Lineham, the Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the Festival of Sydney, who replaced Brett Sheehy in 2006, forty percent of their budget is via sponsorship. Doubtless the situation is similar in Melbourne.

And of course, difficulties must arise in planning a program that derives from a reliance upon sponsorship—planning becomes a tightrope of enticing possibilities stretched across a chasm of stultifying reality. This is further complicated as the Festival Director has to spend equivalent time talking to stakeholders, sponsors and artists as to evaluating prospective performances and exhibitions. Inevitably many of the sponsorships don't work out and bookings change as acts move to other venues or receive more attractive offers. The sheer volume of events that needs to be previewed, scheduled, booked and covered financially is overwhelming. There is never more than a skeleton staff to manage and coordinate, but festivals as large as Melbourne's carry specialist crew such as a visual arts advisor. In the past Juliana Engberg has carried out this role. Engberg is ideally positioned. As Artistic Director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art she is highly connected and taps into extensive contemporary art networks in Australia and abroad. Engberg was responsible for the 1999 *Melbourne International Biennale*, which gave her great experience in understanding the complexities of a major cultural event. Her input is, I feel, missing on this occasion, making the Festival appear light in the visual arts area.

While the MIAF is known primarily as a performing arts festival, built around dance, theatre and opera spectacles, Director Christie Edmunds focused on a group of artists whose work blurs the traditional disciplines and distinctive features of each artform. Its theme suggested that Edmunds wanted to increase visual arts events and include more design, architecture and film. However, there was a real need to convey this vision to the visual arts stakeholders and offer genuine incentive if the festival is to tease galleries and museums into climbing aboard the band wagon. In the main, the festival offered little beyond marketing opportunities, rarely funds.

A strong festival will prompt debate, inspire and agitate, and nurture an appreciation for arts practice. The Melbourne International Arts Festival, in picking its interdisciplinary theme, is going in the right direction but has not yet taken up the challenge of giving the visual arts the standing it deserves within the Festival.