

# OPEN LETTER TO THE HON. MIKE RANN, PREMIER AND MINISTER FOR THE ARTS CONCERNING THE MATTER OF A MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART FOR SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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26 April 2002  
Dear Mike,

1. My premise is simple, the challenge direct. The visual arts infrastructure in Adelaide is in a condition of sterile stasis. It is necessary to break its constraining mould and bring forth a shining new body to present contemporary art to South Australia and South Australian contemporary art to the world: the Museum of Contemporary Art of South Australia [MOCASA].

2. There are many significant visual arts practitioners in South Australia, and such an institution would constitute a beacon attracting more. SA owes it to itself and the world. A signature building, on North Terrace, as part of the cultural precinct. Maybe, at a pinch, in the Tram Building, off Victoria Square. To foster, display and promote excellence in contemporary visual arts. Big enough to curate or accept substantial exhibitions of contemporary art on a regular basis, something no existing SA institution is equipped to manage, being too big [in one instance] or too small. Adelaide misses too exhibitions crucial to the advancing agenda of contemporary art in Australia, while local curators, apart from those at the Art Gallery of South Australia [AGSA], are condemned to work perpetually on a miniature scale. The MOCASA's exhibition program would generate healthy attendance levels. The building must also be attractive enough an amenity to draw in a wide public which, international experience shows, is ready and waiting for such a venture.

3. The AGSA rightly has a much wider, more historically oriented brief than would the MOCASA's. Long may the *Adelaide Biennials* prosper, but they are just that – biennial. Whatever the AGSA does, its multiple agendas can never adequately serve the needs of contemporary art, nor should they. A contemporary sculpture garden was planned for the grounds of that fantastical folly, Carrick Hill, but it has never truly 'taken.' For this we might be grateful. If Carrick Hill is now a well-run house museum, Springfield is not a place for contemporary art. But what about that other mansion, Government House... come the Republic, could a minimalist governorship free up the vegetable and flower gardens around said building for a MOCASA?

Apart from government flagships, two of Adelaide's three universities, Flinders and the University of SA, support modest-sized art museums with high quality exhibition programs, fated as they may be to wrestling like Laocoon within institutional coils. Flinders runs its on two separate sites, and the UniSA, after some seventeen years of struggle, is set to gain fully professional premises, a noteworthy development. [The University of Adelaide, in effect, has the AGSA as its gallery, accessed by students in an innovative joint art-history program]. The university museums acknowledge the contemporary as a significant pole of reference but they necessarily fulfil valuable historical and pedagogical agendas as well, in a particular niche at a tangent to the contemporary.

4. The contemporary is addressed principally by a clutch of other publicly funded arts spaces, including Artspace, the JamFactory Gallery, the Nexus Multicultural Arts Centre, the Experimental Art Foundation [EAF] and the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia [CACSA]. These beaconettes have historically received drip-feed funding: enough to keep them alive, but not enough for them to flourish, except by dint of heroic efforts, in some cases, on the part of their staff. The organisations indicated jointly form the ever-revolving hub of a local, opening-oriented, contemporary 'scene,' of which the EAF and the CACSA are major spokes. Nexus and the JamFactory are similarly crucial, with a more varied clientele and less of the hardcore art crowd. Another important spoke is the Greenaway Art Gallery, virtually the only dealer gallery for contemporary art in South Australia of national and international significance, though other attractive spaces exist. The private sector, however, is not my main concern here, rather to re-establish the idea of public responsibility for cultural growth.

The art crowd is dominated by students and recent graduates. Does the scene, including the organisations here named, their clientele and spin-off, fly-by-night exhibition spaces, form a wall-less museum of contemporary art? Emphatically not. It has its small excitements, hungers, and complicities: it is an enjoyable chain-of-ponds in which to swim. It is nonetheless too confined in its constituent base, too poverty-stricken and too ritualised in its functioning to do other than perpetuate itself, let alone significantly grow or impact on the wider world. To even begin to conceive of its [metaphorically speaking] low-rise status as iconic would be as pathetic as suggesting that Adelaide's architectural low-rise character is somehow iconic.

The MOCASA would, of course, impact on the local art ecology, but I would caution against the latter's diminution, for example by amalgamation, in a town thinly served by the private sector. The wetlands should not be drained for the MOCASA's sake, because they would provide it context and challenge, an echoing ambience.

5. Three main art schools currently feed the Adelaide scene. These, in principle, offer a wide spectrum of options to students, from a private school [the Adelaide Central School, affiliated with Flinders University though it is], through a TAFE school [AIT Arts] to a university school [the South Australian School of Art (SASA)]. They also run exhibition spaces or galleries, in each case with a strong student focus [respectively, the Adelaide Central Gallery, the Light Square Gallery and J111]. The schools are among the partners of the misleadingly named Helpmann Academy, initially conceived with only the performing arts in mind. Helpmann family money funds scholarships in NSW, but does not contribute to the Academy in SA. Various educational institutions, including the three universities and TAFE, provide its funds, along with the private sector, and your government. These institutions submerge their identities in the Academy as it fosters productive overseas connections and channels money back to their students. The Academy was occasioned in consonance with a pervasive notion that Adelaide should promote itself as a 'centre of excellence' in

arts education. It was, a one-time Executive Officer of Arts SA opined, 'something South Australia could achieve without much cost.' Hence repeated mention of helping 'emerging artists' in arts-funding promotional literature.

Young people must be helped. The best students should be given grants and scholarships: it is good for South Australia, as a small state, that Gordon Samstag cannily ensured a small local bias in his fabled, eponymous scholarship program, and it is fitting that Arts SA assists young South Australians. There are plenty of good students today, perhaps more than ever. Even so, the very plurality of educational institutions and students beggars the idea of excellence in the arts activities, just as the Dawkins-inspired explosion in the university sector has diminished the value of university degrees and staff academic titles alike as secure measures of academic or artistic worth. Becoming a centre of educational excellence is a fine idea, but leave formal education to the educators.

The truth be told, most emerging artists turn out not to be artists at all, giving up practice a few years beyond graduation [which, incidentally, is in no way to say that their study was wasted: a visual arts education is a fine foundation for many a career]. Most young people, understandably, necessarily, will leave South Australia in search of greener fields. It is tearingly important for South Australia's cultural and intellectual health that it be more than a nursery for the Eastern States and the wider world. It is crucial that South Australia sufficiently honour the middle-generation and older artists working in this state, making Adelaide, especially, an attractive place for artists to return to after their *wanderjahre*. Arts SA scholarships for returning artists is a welcome, incomplete gesture towards that idea, as are the even more constructive Arts SA mid-career fellowships. Lifestyle and cost-of-living considerations give this state the basis of advantage. A MOCASA would constitute a visible sign that serious arts practice is respected, would more widely seem *possible*, in Adelaide and South Australia. And, of course, even as a nursery South Australia would be more effective with a MOCASA.

6. 'Excellence' in the visual arts does not imply élitism in the pejorative sense. The relationship of the arts to social justice, politics and progress — even to health — is almost always complex and subtle. We are all as complicit with, as critical of, the wider culture. The days are long gone when artists could meaningfully claim that their work is 'subversive,' contrary to their recent, widespread wont. It is wise therefore to avoid any suggestion that the arts *per se* directly serve the purposes of social utility, even though museums of contemporary art are very popular, becoming central to the tourism and entertainment industries. I will refrain from labouring the Bilbao/Tate Modern success stories, because you know them backwards. Museums of contemporary art create a sense of agora: witness the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

Talk of tourism brings into focus another socio-political consideration: the ever-lurking spectre of competitive federalism, as indicated by the developing arts infrastructure in other state capitals. The near perfect AGSA extensions opened in 1998, yet consider the ten times more expensive, \$260m Queensland Millenium Arts Project, of which the central plank is the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, aplanning as we speak. [I won't even mention the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, or Federation Square in Melbourne — you might consider such enterprises less fair as comparisons]. Against such ambition, Arts SA's *Arts+* document last year plugged a number of laudable but relatively small scale visual arts projects. It also foregrounded programs for disabled access and proclaimed airconditioning for Tandanya [National Aboriginal Cultural Institute]. These things should be taken absolutely for granted. They should not be paid for by arts budgets. In crude Darwinian terms alone, South Australia cannot not afford to think big. But please be alert: Mephistophelean figures will slide from the shadows whispering, 'if Sydney had difficulty getting its MCA established, what hope has Adelaide got?' Block your ears. Sydney has lacked the necessary political will, but your will could surely compensate for the size differential invoked here. For goodness sake... remember Wellington? It has its City Gallery, big enough to hold several major shows simultaneously. It is currently showing a Tracey Moffatt retrospective, precisely the sort of exhibition which rarely comes to Adelaide, the AGSA's program being too full and too various, and other spaces being too small and too poor. Every city worthy of its name, says ABC art critic Bruce James, needs a museum of contemporary art, just as it needs good coffee shops. Adelaide has a number of the latter, but they will never substitute for the former.

If the latte point strikes you as a bit light-on, consider the fact that institutions like the putative MOCASA make a place real, valid, solid. They reflect ourselves back to ourselves, and put us in an international context which, I can assure you, would not be unkind at all to the local work. Yet if all of Australia suffers from a rabbit syndrome, as per Don Watson's essay satirically suggesting Australia become a state of the United States, then Adelaide suffers a rabbit syndrome within that again, if you get my drift. Reality is falsely seen to be not just overseas, but, too often, elsewhere in Australia.

7. The popularity of contemporary art museums lies in their aura, derived not least from the projected spiritual hunger of its audiences. In such museums visitors find lively exchanges between what used to be called high and low culture. Even so, one thing is clear: the proposed institution must never speak down to its audience. Pander, and you are done. My experience in art museums taught me very early that the audience for a populist event does not cross over into attendance at a different sort of presentation. You build an audience by appealing to their intelligence, their appetite to know. It can be done, and done here. The *Adelaide Festival* has done a great job, historically, in educating its audiences to understand and exalt in the best of the performing arts [think Cage, Bausch,

Rustaveli... and, by the way, many cheers for *The Ring*. The Adelaide Symphony Orchestra flourished under the baton of Jeffrey Tate, even to my tin ear, an example of synergy between local and global]. The photography program at the University of New Mexico, a state university centred in a town half the size and twice as benighted as Adelaide, became a world beater because its founding fathers, Van Deren Coke and Beaumont Newhall, refused to accept anything less. Civilisation in a desert, by fiat.

8. 'Excellence' in contemporary art implies investigation and innovation. Here a particular understanding of the word 'contemporary' can help, which I will come to shortly. I will not bore you by ringing the definitional changes of the phrase 'contemporary art.' As you will have noticed, I have been using its common or garden meaning thus far, as designating those cultural items presented through an institutionalised global network which constitutes the contemporary art scene. The very term 'contemporary art' has displaced 'modernism' and 'postmodernism,' as Terry Smith has pointed out, even though we continue to live in times profoundly shaped by those cultural conditions. As Smith has also observed, 'contemporary art' tends to refer to surface and screening, to the photogenic [photography, cinema, digital media]. Surfacing and screening provide the dominant frames for the visual arts today: compare the historical frames of perspectival space, baroque theatricality, the picturesque, the modernist grid.

But consider, for a moment, the philosophical proposition – at the risk of sounding smart-arsed – that we do not know what contemporary art is, not in the banal sense that its manifestations are protean beyond comprehension, but because it is always in the process of becoming. It ceases to be contemporary or to be art, in a strict sense, once it is completed, and what we think of as art, isn't. It would be difficult to ask sponsors to back non-existent art, although the idea here expressed might appeal to a George Soros or two. Art represents discovery: the creativity of meaningful art seems no different in general principle from any other sort of creativity, although the visual arts are most powerful, for me, when they also draw on the aesthetic [tricky term] – which in turn accesses our genetic as well as cultural inheritance, the power of ages, transgenerational, intercultural electricity. These things we could debate and explore for years, ideally through and around the MOCASA, fleshed out, that is, in art objects, not just the verbal interweavings of the seminar room. What is not arguable is the huge contribution the MOCASA could make to the understanding of visual culture, to cultural R & D – nor that such institutions in this country require a significant level of public support.

9. The aesthetic is ignored in the icier regions of the contemporary art world: paradoxically, as Matthew Collings has pointed out, the international art press has adopted the hot values of the tabloids. Within that sort of consciousness political gestures are made in full knowledge of their ineffectuality, in turn part of their cool. Witness the history of the Turner Prize. The innovation of such art, intimately and variously chronicled by Collings in print and television, tends to lie in manipulation of the art world itself, thus comprising an enervated, de-idealised avant-gardism. Yet all around us the world flashes with images. In an age of mega-visibility, spectacle and celebrity we had better find spaces for exploring and analysing and celebrating the visual in its most potent forms.

Taxpayers' money provides the most neutral intellectual space, as embodied in the physical form of a museum of contemporary art, for that most valuable of qualities, reflection. The task of recovering such a space seems as urgent for the visual arts as it is for universities, distracted by their corporatising rush. Here a species of cultural studies argument might augment our case: we need an agency to facilitate the analysis of images in a manner fully cognizant not only of semiology but of the wayward subjectivities of artists. Between the two poles of artworld games and a cultural studies perspective, there is room for exceptional individuals and groups to advance ideas and subjectivity in powerful visual forms. There is certainly a sufficient number of artists in South Australia alone to merit an institution devoted in no small part to exploring, challenging and showcasing their work. Do I have to name names?

10. We have a scattering, though not enough, of parent figures/teachers and/or major artists – elders, in short. You will instantly be provoked into thinking of some of them. We also have a host of serious investigators, many of whom deserve to be far better known than they are. The invidious task of proving this point by listing warm bodies was resolved for me by the adventitious fact of an invitation tumbling out of the mail this morning. It happened to be from the UniSA, but comparable items arrive regularly from the other publicly funded organisations mentioned above. The card listed two artists, Helen Fuller and Warren Vance, plus a trio of architects, Rachel Hurst, Jane Lawrence and Gini Lee. The work of these and several score of other South Australians would be well worthy of presentation in a Museum of Contemporary Art, along with outstanding work from interstate and overseas.

11. The MOCASA must take on a South Australian aspect. It must not present a carbon copy of international curatorial correctness. The very existence of a critical mass of artists living in this state, which the Museum would help bring about, would help the MOCASA achieve distinctive qualities.

South Australia possesses particular cultural character, assets and predilections. Adelaide's very isolation both necessitates focused action on behalf of the visual arts while allowing a certain freedom from commercial and fashionable pressures. In the 1970s, when Adelaide was definitely the place in Australia to be, it enabled the city to initiate a raft of ventures of national significance. The Experimental Art Foundation, in its early period, was a genuine attempt to explore the character of art. Think also of the Jam, WAM [Women's Art Movement], and PAM [the Progressive Art Movement], Nexus, the MRC [Media Resource Centre] and a revitalised Contemporary Art Centre of SA, plus Link Exhibitions at the AGSA. Adelaide's accessible amenities plus cheap living make it a seedbed in which numbers of significant artists flourish across a wide range of practice, from George Popperwell's neo-avantgardism through Hossein Valamanesh's mediations on place to Kathleen Petyarre's contemporary traditionalism [whoops: more names!]. Their work exceeds quick tags. Such keepers of the flame can only be encouraged by a MOCASA pitched at a higher level of ambition, infrastructure and financial support than were those glowing 1970s initiatives and their still functioning descendants.

Mention of Petyarre is a reminder that the MOCASA would be an ideal place to explore, relatively free of politics, the implications of the greatest art movement in Australia's recorded art history, namely the Aboriginal art revolution of the past three decades. Aboriginal artists moved, in effect, beyond the formalist impasse of late modernism, creating a third term beyond the two sides of the early postmodernist coin, pop and minimalism. It will take decades for artists and historians to work through the consequent implications. We are constantly told that the South Australian Museum houses the most ethnographically comprehensive collections of Aboriginal cultural material in the world. We should, of course, have had another 'destination museum' centring around that material... another very important story, but one which MOCASA could help redeem.

Indeed the MOCASA would be a perfect SA site for fostering interculturalism generally, the inevitable if contested cultural concomitant of globalism. Interculturalism is a defining feature for the new global paradigm for art, no less, replacing all those Euro-American paradigms we learned in art history [Christian, European, Modern, etc.]. Exciting times! A smart society needs a MOCASA to keep it up to international scratch.

12. It would be good if you could see the MOCASA project through. How long would it take? A good eight years? How many terms in office do the entrails portend for you? Perhaps you would consider forming a couple of bodies pretty quickly to advance this matter: an advisory group to sketch a brief and work through the implications for re-arranging the visual arts infrastructure in SA; and a separate, more powerful task force, working directly to you, to finalise a brief and make the thing happen. The second group should absolutely not be bound by the former, should the impossible happen and it fail to rise above the parochial. The first group should include Arts SA, AGSA, the universities and other organisations named herein, including the CACSA, Nexus and the EAF. The AGSA is especially important for a range of reasons, not least because its functions are too significant to be compromised: the aim, rather, must be to complement AGSA's operations. The committee should also include well qualified people from elsewhere in Australia. The constitution of the second and perhaps overlapping group I leave to you, but it should also include the best expertise nationally available. You might want it to run a competition to establish the MOCASA's architects [setting aside the MCA in Sydney's abortive efforts in that regard recently]. The second group could also raise money, though that task would be best left to a third body.

13. 'Museum of Contemporary Art': if the word 'contemporary' seems to contradict implications of collecting, of history conveyed by 'museum', the past is contained within the present, to be interrogated constantly by institutions like the one proposed. But the MOCASA's main public face should be exhibitions, not its collection. As the State's principal institution for contemporary art it should collect works of art, retaining them for a strictly limited term [say twenty years], in full consciousness that acquiring art works also means accepting obligations of storage, security and conservation – all of which costs. After the set period works collected could be offered to the AGSA, or sold. It would be necessary that the MOCASA work throughout with the AGSA on this matter, as sunset collecting policies have a way of eroding over time. Certainly the AGSA should remain the principal art collecting institution for the state. Keeping records and archives, fostering research, and publishing would be more important in the long-term for the MOCASA than acquiring art.

The MOCASA must include at least enough space to mount a brace of substantial exhibitions simultaneously, and also a project space, for quick-turnover experimental work. All, naturally, to the highest museum standards of climate control, security, lighting and so forth. It must also have an excellent multimedia equipped auditorium, and a major art bookshop, the best in town. The architect will be distinguished enough to know where to back off. We can forgo Frank O. Gehry and Associates: Australia's Peddle Thorp & Walker Pty. Ltd., or Fender Katsalides [Aust.] Pty. Ltd., for example, would do just fine, working with some of the excellent, new breed architects working in Adelaide, who seldom get a shot at major structures. The site, as suggested, must be centrally located, within walking distance of the AGSA, the South Australian Museum, and the other institutions of Adelaide's principal cultural precinct.

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In conclusion, I hope I have sufficiently indicated that:

- the art scene in SA is ready for and worthy of the proposed MOCASA;
- between the AGSA at one extreme and the many publicly funded spaces at the other – all important to the arts ecology of SA – there is a conspicuous, MOCASA-sized hole;
- the MOCASA would bring a wide, new audience mix into the orbit of the visual arts, fostering not just tourism and all that stands for, but a smart, innovative and well-informed society.

A castle in the air? Not at all. I sense a huge, aching, long-repressed desire for leadership, for significant change, in the visual arts scene in South Australia. Look up: the aspirations of thousands of repressed souls are manifesting in the shape of a museum of contemporary art. Let us make it real.

Sincerely,

Ian

PS: the following were referred to in writing in this letter:

*Arts+*: Investing in the arts and our Artists, 2000-2005, Arts SA, Adelaide 2000  
 Matthew Collings, *Art Crazy Nation: the Post Blimey Art World*, London: 21 Publishing, 2001  
 Bernice Murphy, *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision & Context*, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993  
 'Landmark Queensland designs to showcase arts to world', News release. Office of the Premier of Queensland, 8 April 2002  
 Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come*, Sydney: ArtSpace Visual Art Centre, 2001  
 Don Watson, *The Rabbit Syndrome: Australia and America* [Quarterly Essay]. Melbourne, Black Inc., 2001  
 Wellington City Gallery website, available from [www.city-gallery.org.nz/www.city-gallery.org.nz/](http://www.city-gallery.org.nz/www.city-gallery.org.nz/) accessed 26 April 2002