

■ Comment

Without talk, gallery-going is just a form of shopping

By KEVIN MURRAY

MELBOURNE'S contemporary art spaces are not just for puzzling over quirky objects. At night, galleries make engaging venues for lectures, talks and performances.

What's missing today are the high-profile art forums. Adelaide Festival's Artists Week no longer features speakers' panels where ideas can be contested. Talks are dotted around the gallery circuit: the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art hosts visiting lecturers; the Centre for Contemporary Photography maintains its annual series of erudite lectures; RMIT Gallery has the occasional forum; and Spân Galleries sponsors discussions.

Most recently, it was standing-room-only at 200 Gertrude Street for the public meeting *Beyond the Biennial*. There are still people out there.

The Biennial itself had no space for critical debate. Rather than public forums, there was an opening party, artists' talks and critics' "faves". During that time, and perhaps even now, there was a feeling that to be critical of the Biennial was to be unsupportive of the visual arts. While the old Telecom building was filled with works of gentle humanism, the publicity conveyed paranoid messages such as "You are being

watched". At a time when the Victorian Government was busy gagging critics, it seemed particularly important to offer a space for critical debate. So why didn't it occur? Apart from practical issues of money and venue, I could think of three good reasons not to hold a public forum. Each is worthy of riposte.

Where are the issues? You could argue that the time of "grand issues" has passed, along with the nation state and mass culture. We now have a feudal "indie" art scene that bubbles away in artist-run galleries. True, but there are still broader issues that touch on the arts. Australia's lost place in the world, genetically modified realities, the absence of Aboriginal and non-indigenous dialogue, even the disappearing role of the artist in a DIY culture are all issues that eat away at public life. While they are sometimes the subject of expert opinion, these issues are rarely aired in open discussion.

Doesn't this reduce art to a conversation piece? Sure, a lazy gallery visitor might use theory as a short-cut to the art. Yet the physical encounter with works can prise open our minds to alternative points of view. Why else would someone have risked imprisonment to smash Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ* at the National Gallery of Victoria?

Forums aren't essential to the performing arts, why should they be

part of the visual arts? We can always envy the popularity of theatre and music (as they, no doubt, envy the freedom of galleries). However, a visit to the gallery offers a more intimate experience of talk. Interpretations are shared, if not with a companion, then at least with a gallery attendant. It is from these conversations that public discourse constructs a community of ideas. Without talk, it's just shopping.

Over time, there have been many grand plans to harvest Melbourne's intellectual life. The Committee for Melbourne once proposed a debating theatre in the middle of the city. Indeed, a forum of ideas was considered in early planning for a visual arts festival. But then Theoretica grew into Contempora, which blossomed into an art prize and bore fruit as a Biennial. Now the Biennial will probably be mulched down into what by any other name is a sculpture triennial.

Meanwhile, the Sydney 2000 Biennale seems to be running on empty. The committee-designed theme "Japanese art stars, Australian icons, American legends" is worthy of the Games. Surely there is some slack here that we can take up. After all, talk is cheap.

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