Juliana Engberg, on curating

Hannah Mathews

Posted: Monday, 1 July 2013 at 5:25pm

In a new interview series, Hannah Mathews invites leading art curators from around the country to reflect on their influences, experience, the state of the profession, and, mostly importantly, to consider their relationship with art and artists. Juliana Engberg is the Artistic Director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and the Biennale of Sydney 2014.

Hannah Mathews: Why are you a curator?

Juliana Engberg: I'm a curator because I didn't want to be an academic, I didn't want to remain within the theoretical realm of art practice, merely looking at it as history and storytelling retrospectively. For me it became fairly immediately important as I was studying Fine Arts and Art History [late 1970s-early 80s] that I wanted to be interacting with real work to deal with the things that were being created at that time. I really enjoy the intellectual thinking that applies to a more academic approach and I do still really love art history, but I still like being in the tangible. I felt it weird, actually, as a student that I was always looking at things that were beyond my actual visionary reach. It felt frustrating to be looking at Ghiberti's Doors (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenzo_Ghiberti) [Duomo, Florence] and not standing in front of them in Florence; it did strike me as a bit peculiar to be doing this kind of weird time travel when in fact there were things around me I should be dealing with.

Not many people were dealing with them [contemporary art] then. I have to be honest, it was quite a struggle. Inside the academy itself there were a few of us at Melbourne University who really wanted to look at contemporary things, really wanted to grapple with and get to terms with what was being made. And we made propositions to the Fine Arts department that we'd like to actually have at least some element of looking at contemporary practice in the curriculum but it was very poorly received, it was almost like a coup and it rather confirmed for me the fact that I was probably in slightly the wrong direction for myself because it just seemed a bit passive.

Curating, therefore, presented itself as an interesting thing to think about doing, but it didn't exist in the way that I am doing it now. In a certain way this has been an invented kind of practice because when I was coming up through university, curators were really people in charge of collections living inside big institutions like the NGV [National Gallery of Victoria] or libraries or museums. There wasn't really that idea of the more independent curator or the curator generator, which is, I think, a little bit what I've become. A little bit but not entirely.

I guess the quick answer is I couldn't be else wise.

What led you to become a curator?

Well like most little nerds I was pretty good at drawing and making stuff when I was a kid, and being an only child I think I was often trying to find ways of entertaining myself and thinking through puzzles and things like that. I was a creative child I suppose. But I was also an academically bright kid and really liked the way in which looking at art described a world that then took me to a further world and took me on a kind of intellectual journey into music and other things.

My first thought was to go to university and probably work as an academic teaching in Fine Arts, or as it became known Art History. Because I was interested in what was happening around me I started to be a reviewer for Farrago, which was the Melbourne University student newspaper, and found I had some facility for writing in a way that seemed to be quite entertaining for people, and informative. As a result of that somebody then asked me to become the arts reviewer for Triple R [radio station], so I did that for a while too. I diligently went in on a Wednesday night and recorded my reviews of stuff that was going on and then I'd come back in for the show, put my tape around the reels. It was very lo-tech.

Paul Taylor then asked me to work with him on *Art & Text (http://www.abc.net.au/arts/blog/arts-desk/Paul-Taylor-art-text-popism/default.htm)* and that was an exciting time. They were sort of heydays really. In some ways I owe to Paul th opportunity of entering into the profession properly. I was always sort of around it, working at art bookshops, doing the sort of stuff you do as a student, but Paul told me about a job going at the George Paton Gallery and encouraged me to apply. One day I was doing five part-time jobs and the next day I was the assistant director of a gallery. It was also the same week I was asked if I would audition for the TV show Prisoner so it was one of those forks in the road moments! I was also studying advertising at the time and even though I didn't pursue that it was one of the great things I did and has been incredibly important to the way I've framed some of the communication elements of my practice.

You have worked within an experimental university art space (George Paton Gallery), a private museum (Heide Museum of Modern Art), a contemporary art space (ACCA (https://www.accaonline.org.au/)) and in various gues curatorial roles with festivals (Melbourne, Edinburgh) and biennales (Sydney (http://www.biennaleofsydney.com.au/), Venice, Melbourne, Adelaide, Christchurch). What has working across this range of positions offered you and how have they informed your curatorial practice and working methods?

Once you move out of a smallish space like the George Paton Gallery and move somewhere like Heide and the festivals and into the bigger situation of something like ACCA, you are also moving toward an audience. When I got to Heide I realised there were a great number of people I wished to speak with and engage with, not only artists but a broad, general audience. Out at Heide there tends to be a particular kind of audience, a comfortable, often middle class, slightl older demographic, and I needed to think of some curatorial way of engaging with those people and bringing them somewhat closer to contemporary practice. I invented what I called the trans-historical show, which was a good way of dealing with a lack of bulk in the Heide collection and the desire I had to combine history with current practice. Shows like *Downtown: Ruscha, Rooney, Arkley (http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?exhibition_id=5005)* (1995), *Lovers* (1995), *Colonial/Post Colonial* (1996) and *The Real Thing* (1997) were actually rather entertaining shows for that public to deal with. They grew a greater audience for art because they drew the contemporary practitioners together with those older people and somehow the middle people started to come as well. That was exciting for me and from that time I have always thought of the three things that I am mostly interested in – and that's art, artists and audience.

To me the three As are the key drivers of what I do and why I do. I don't think I'm interested in art that isn't somehow interesting to an audience and I want to work with artists who are able to bridge both practice and communication. I want to be the person who actually assists that I guess. I always say that this ACCA is very much concerned with the three As but that it is in the context of a greater network of spaces here in Melbourne and elsewhere. We want people to take from art all the exciting things that can be delivered from it and that are useful for our creative selves, our social

selves, and our cognitive selves.

Could you speak specifically about the differences and challenges between making exhibitions for an organisation like ACCA and something like the Biennale of Sydney (http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/art-as-extreme-sport-for-next-biennale-20130513-2ji86.html)? They are two distinctly different modes and not many people could do both.

The biennale is a hyper-audience activity but it's also a hyper-art activity. It lives between the art space and the festival space to some extent. It's an event and it has a timeframe so it has a different kind of energy from a program that you might produce year in year out, longitudinally referencing itself backwards with a necklace of things stringing along in various ways. This will be my third time working on a biennale so I do know the beast and the beast changes each time, depending upon the context of the zoo. With Sydney it's a very large event. Its typology of spaces, its sheer geography, is vast and then the actual size of spaces themselves are huge.

I think of myself somewhat as a spatial curator and the Sydney event is very interesting to think about from the point of view of both programming and space. I love thinking through the typologies of the buildings and what might work well in them and what won't work. You can't put certain things out at Cockatoo Island as it's permeable, birds will shit on things, the vast public of 665,000 will clamber on things if you let them, it's an unregulated sort of space, it's not a museum sort of space and hence you need to be cautious about that and quite practical.

At the same time you're trying to give attention to the tempo of the event from the visitor point of view. You need to have different kinds of temporal movements within such a big event; slow paced things, fast paced things, you need stuff that's spectacular and stuff that's contemplative, you need moments of repose and moments of reverie. It has to be an occasion in which you fulfil many expectations and yet know not everything will be liked by every person but that hopefully you will give each person enough stuff that they can get to grips with at different sorts of levels.

The Biennale has a vast general audience, unlike something like ACCA which has a pretty large but learned audience. Because it is this mega event the Biennale reaches out to the mums, the dads, the pops, the families, people who are really just out for a good day because it's a free event. You are trying to build into that event aesthetic experiences that will grab their hearts and minds quite quickly and perhaps bring them along on a longer journey for life. One of my key audiences for the Biennale will be children. I'd love to think a few kids might find enough value in the art for them to think 'you know what, I'm going to be a creative individual'. I don't mean that they will necessarily become an artist, maybe a good plastic surgeon or something, but that they will become a thinking person, a creative person; I think that makes for a generally better society. I think the Biennale is a very, very big canvas so you've got opportunities to mix it up a bit and be a little bit playful with it too.

How much are you seeking to influence people's actual physical engagement with the Biennale, considering it covers such a big area and range of spaces?

There are some practical things that you do and some artistic things that you do.

On the artistic side of things I will have some link projects so you won't see the whole thing unless you do the whole thing. Hopefully this might motivate people.

From a highly practical point of view I believe it's helpful to give people assistance to actually negotiate a thing like the Biennale. I'm going to construct a one day itinerary, a 2-3 day itinerary, and a four day itinerary, so that if you are time poor, as many people are, you'll still be able to see the particular highlights or at least take a particular kind of journey through the Biennale.

The other quite simple device that I will institute is to put an ideal viewing time near the description of each work in the

guide, just so people know that this is a video that lasts about 20 minutes and that if you stay to watch it you've still got plenty of time to see x, y and z.

I'm thinking also of creating what I call the longer program. Many artists have moved to an almost super video level, where they are making highly developed, almost cinematic-quality, very professionalised pieces of moving image work that require long viewing and a commitment of time. You won't get the arc of the story or the issue unless you sit through it. I think if you deposit works like this in the midst of an exhibition the size of the Biennale you're inclined to be robbing people of time. I think it's more sensible to create a zone for that type of engagement and have a rolling program changing perhaps three times in the sequence of the event itself. Saying to people look here's a program that you can go in and out of, time and time again, and just pick off this one thing or two. You don't have to imbibe it all on that day and you don't have to worry about the fact that it's taking time away from other things.

Some of my work is practical, I just think through the way that people use space or they use time or their tolerance for a certain type of thing. I think if you make it an intolerable event people will dislike it and if you make it a variegated, temporal event and stimulating in a variety of aesthetic ways then they will actually quite enjoy it. It's most helpful to give them a lot of forward warning and advice on how they should structure their time. It's at least a five day event in my mind.

You have worked with a range of artists throughout your career. Well known names like Barbara Kruger, Joseph Kosuth, Susan Norrie, John Nixon and Tacita Dean through to younger and emerging artists in group exhibitions such as ACCA's annual NEW program. Some artists you have worked with time and time again. Could you speak to your working relationship with artists and the dynamic between artist and curator? What do you make of the discussion around the curator as artist?

Yes I don't see myself as a curator-as-artist. I want to be clear about that. I do see myself as being an active collaborator at an early conceptual stage and I think the beauty of working with a number of people time and again is that you develop a relationship where you have a confident way of actually speaking about their work and how it evolves. But I am never confused by this. I know that it is the artist and their artwork. I'm there to facilitate that and encourage them into certain directions that their work already suggests to me and probably suggests to them too. I'm there to offer opportunities for understanding the space and how that space may be used. As you come to know artists better, and Tacita [Dean] and Barbara (http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts/the-artist-as-brand/2005/12/01/1133311157485.html?page=fullpage) [Kruger] are good examples, they develop a trust with you so that together you can both take it up a notch or two.

The Biennale is a good example again. There are a lot of people that we've worked with at ACCA that have not been seen in Sydney. I think it would be mean-spirited of me to not offer to Sydney audiences the chance to see the work of some of the fabulous artists that I've worked with before. When you've got that trust with an artist you can then bring them to a Biennale and get them to do something great, which is exciting for them but also really thrilling for a new audience. Really it is about all the different kinds of opportunities that come to you.

I often say to artists, particularly Australian artists and especially the younger ones still developing their practice, that you don't always have to assume that because you've done this project once that it's done. Sometimes it's actually really important for artists to have another go at it, to revisit work. The resources may be different, the space may be different, the challenges may be different but maybe the idea is still there to be further generated. I think a lot of the time artists, especially Australian artists, don't necessarily believe in the idea of taking a work to all of its destinations. But if you look at the practice of people like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, they don't abandon their concept or idea, they actually find other ways of articulating it, they grow it and in doing so they perfect it to some extent.

Why do you think this situation is particular to Australian artists?

I think it's because we're a small environment and there's a sense of 'oh, I've worn that out' or 'there's already been an audience for that idea'. I suppose that is a problem with our area being so sequestered away from the rest of the world, being its own art world in a sense. I remember many years ago for the Melbourne Biennale saying to Patricia Piccinini, "you know the work you did with the screens for the activated digital forest, I think it could be perfected." She'd done a smallish version of it, I think it was at the MCA, and I just felt it wasn't finished, possibly due to the limitations in technology at the time. She said "really?" And I said I think that's a really good work and I'd like to see it enlarged and really thoroughly gone into instead of sort of halfish done. So we made this huge, wonderful, fluttering, glowing rainforest, and it was great. I think it was a revelation to Patricia that you could in fact actually go back and activate a work, extend it, improve it. Oftentimes you can do that, not always, but sometimes it's highly desirable.

How do we define quality when it comes to contemporary art?

And how do you balance the needs of the artist against the demands within the organisation like a board, or funding bodies, or sponsors? I'm not sure I've ever heard you say no to an artist.

I try never to say no unless I see injury to person, unachievability, and failure for the artist. I would never say no arbitrarily. I always try and protect an artist from taking themselves to a place that's perhaps impossible for them to reach at that time. Especially younger artists, they may have very ambitious plans but perhaps it's a little unrealistic and unrealisable.

At ACCA we've got a role to play helping artists become professional in their approach to things. So while a 'no' might be unwelcome at the early stage of a work, we do have to say look that's not going to pass the risk assessment, think again. It's good for artists to actually have to think through things. It's an easy mistake to make at an early stage, to think that everything you think is brilliant and boom!

I think we are here to serve artists and to help them do the best job they can to realise their dream or their vision. That's ACCA's purpose in being, that's why we're a kunsthalle [a space for contemporary exhibitions] and not a collecting institution that deals with things retrospectively. We're actually producers and we're collaborators in that sense. I'm an artist advocate but I'm an audience advocate too so I don't want to kill anybody.

We place a very high value on excellence and I'm not going to come down from that. If that means from time to time certain things are excluded it's because those things need to come up a little bit. If we show an artist it's because we believe in them and want to give them the best shot to be appreciated in the best possible light for what they've done.

Because we generate much more than 50 percent of our annual income through private means I believe strongly that we've retained the right of independent artistic presentation. I think those people that donate to us, who pay for participating in our public programs, who enable some of what we do through their patronage, etc believe in what we d and have voted with their money, so to speak. That means we are somewhat freer than a lot of other organisations whe it comes to things like programming and policy direction. I've never been a great fan of doctrinaire policy.

I think we've actually placed ourselves in the position where we deserve to be able to call our own tune because we pay for our own tune through a lot of hard and diligent work in a way that a lot of other contemporary art spaces don't. ACCA in this incantation has been extremely fortunate to always have a board respectful of the profession and what we want to do, a board that advocates for us and enables us through means that they can contribute behind the scenes. They have never artistically interfered and I think it's partly to do with the fact that our board is constructed of people who are mostly business-oriented. They are there for their skills and for the expertise that they can offer to us in a pro bono fashion. It's a highly professionalised environment and not a board of vested interest arts people. I think we're a grown up space in that way.

How do you know something is excellent?

There are reasons to know why something is good. Over many years I have developed an innate way of understanding that but I can articulate it somewhat. I think really good art, no matter what period it lives in, has three major components, and they should always be there if it's a really good piece of art.

There should be the 'anthropological'. What I mean by that is a link to society, to humankind, something to help us understand what humankind is actually thinking about. One of the great things about art is that it is often prescient, so it instinctively knows what we're thinking about before we know we're thinking about it.

It should have the 'perceptual'. It ought to actually give us something to contemplate and work with those cognitions to redescribe the world through that process to us.

It needs to have a visuality that is compelling even if it's invisible. You know, if you're Martin Creed and you turn off the lights that is perceptual to me. We expect to come into a space that's light filled with stuff on the walls and all of a sudden it's this darkened space that alters our perception straight away. It completely changes your cognition and makes you adapt in all sorts of ways.

It should be 'psychological'. It should actually describe back to ourselves our own inner self in a fashion. It can do this in a number of ways. It might do this by disrupting our normal transmission of ideas or by confirming it.

If those three things are there then generally it will mean that the artwork is pretty good. But there are a couple of other things that you can then add to make it exceptional.

First, it should be well done. If you're going to turn off the light, turn them all off, don't do it half measure, do the whole thing. Even if it's about not showing anything, be rigorous in that. If it's about painting, do it really well. I know we went through a revolution of art where we dispensed with technique and I'm not talking about everything being virtuosic but I am talking about it having a certain technical, material rigour that makes you believe in the concept. Technically whatever it is it should be really good.

The final thing that really nails it, and it happens rarely, is the artwork's potential to rupture an idea. Art travels along a set of trajectories, often we're following the same idea through and it's evolving, evolving, evolving. Every now and then an artist will come along with a work that ruptures what we know and cause us to rethink the whole thing again. In general that is what contemporary artists strive to do. They know they are working within a plot and within a trajectory of practice. They come from certain types of it, minimalism or whatever, but the really fantastic ones will do something to break it so that we can put it back together again and see it differently once more.

A good example of this, and I think people have not yet talked about it as they might, was when Barbara Kruger took the work out of the frame and put it on the wall. That show at Mary Boone Gallery in 1987 was a huge shift, a massive shift. She dispensed with the iconic object and the commodity object. She put her money literally where her mouth was and said it is ephemeral, but so demonstratively there for the time being. That was a rupture. That was a significant moment in postmodern practice and seemed to bring a lot of those issues into focus.

What do you think has influenced your curatorial interest and understanding of art?

Now I'm in the profession I'm generally interested in what the profession is doing. During the time I've been in it, curatorial practice has changed a lot. Exhibitions have moved from the discreet solo, to surveys of practice and much more commissioning and events. It's so varied now, there's so much more that we do.

But the quick answer is really art. Art describes to me what it wants to be and do, and what it needs from a curatorial point of view. All art is not the same. Once upon a time it was sort of similar, it was a more discreet object wanting to

find a wall or a floor, and now it has many other destinations and ideas about itself. As a curator you see that, and hopefully you see it in a nascent fashion and can predict what needs to happen for it. Curatorial practice is really led by art, well mine is anyway.

Do you see yourself as maverick and if so, how?

Somebody said that about me and that's nice. I like the word maverick actually. I think it's probably because I always really wanted holsters when I was a kid and Mum wouldn't let me. I sort of think of myself as a bit of a pirate or a frontie rider. But no, I imagine lots of people now would regard me as not very maverick at all. But I like to think that I still move a good deal in my practice and that I am prepared to take on the slightly ambitious and scary things. Maybe that makes me a little bit maverick, I don't know. It's for others to make that call.

Do you have a view about the directions and urgencies of the curatorial profession at this time?
I do have a view that there are an awful lot of people being encouraged into it through the establishment of a lot of academic postgraduate courses. I do worry that that is taking us back to the stage where we're getting a lot of people with a slightly academic, theoretical understanding of practice without a highly developed actual sense of practice. And perhaps, you know, don't even love art. I think it's devilish to be sending a whole bunch of university people out into an environment that is not funded to absorb them. That's problematic.

The urgent thing I think is that we need to take the helicopter up and have a look at the whole scene down here. After 15 years of things growing quite rapidly we need to see if the organisations, practices, etc, have grown well and well enough to be robust into the next two to three decades. I hope this review might come as a result of some aspects of the Creative Australia paper that Simon Crean put together (http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3724886.htm). I'd like to see a ramp up of funding that actually enables some of the ambition that we've homegrown. At this point we need some injection of funds to take us to the next level. I think there needs to be some re-jigging, re-shaping of the environment.

ACCA is ready to step up to a platform that is far more prominently lodged in the mindset of the general public, to the betterment of knowledge of contemporary art. Some of the smaller arts spaces perhaps need to think about where they're headed. Some of them need to grow, some of them perhaps don't need to grow, perhaps they need to change their emphasis. I think there's different ways of slicing and dicing this but we don't often take that helicopter up, and I would say it's time for an overview so that we can see what has happened, sometimes somewhat organically, and put some architecture in place for it. I don't just mean physical stuff, I mean get a framework for it. That sounds a bit nerdish and policy-driven but I think it is essential to think that way if we're going to have a good enough, robust enough industry that can continue to nurture the creative things that artists want to do and that audiences want to engage with.

I also miss the magazine. It's a necessary evolution of course, but we haven't quite resolved what we do now given that magazine publishing is never going to be terribly financially viable. It's certainly a very old-fashioned way of getting your stuff out there but it's curious to me that no one has created a really fantastic online publication for Australia that goes out to the world. There's nothing to stop it from travelling that far now. I think there is a lack of discussion and criticism around what we do because there are no great vehicles for it. I know there are little magazines that have come up but they have a small capacity to reach a lot of people. I worry about Australian artists in this respect because it's very hard for Australian artists to get their stuff out there.

I think also that writing could be better. I think that people often confuse criticism with just being critical and often they don't have a strong background of criticality and become opinionated and slightly tetchy. It would be good if there could be a little more skill in writing and if people would remember that writing is also about reading. It's nice if people can write in such a manner that it's pleasurable to read.

- Hannah Mathews (http://www.abc.net.au/arts/read/author.htm?index=idx-arts-byline-hannah-matthews)

Jim Lambie, Eight Miles High, *2008, ACCA* .

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