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Contemporary Art, Craft and the Audience Management Report

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CONTEMPORARY ART, CRAFT AND THE AUDIENCE

Management Report
October 2010

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Cover Image: Marian Hosking detail

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1. Overview

The Australian Research Council awarded a nationally competitive Linkage Project grant to the University of Wollongong (UOW) to work in partnership with Object: Australian Centre for Craft & Design and Museums & Galleries NSW (MG) from 2005-2009 on an audience research and development initiative. The Linkage grant scheme is based on collaborative partnerships between academic researchers and industry organisations, with all three of the partners making a cash and in-kind financial contribution.

The project aimed to provide new frameworks for understanding contemporary craft, art and audiences, building on models of audience research developed in museums and in media studies. It responded to a lack of specific, qualitative research into how audiences interact with contemporary craft and art particularly in regional galleries. The project had three components – literature review and methodological design; qualitative audience research based on several exhibitions; and development of a research findings communication strategy.

Object's *Living Treasures* exhibition series, which commenced in November 2005, was identified as an important platform for developing interpretive material and conducting audience research into contemporary craft. The continuity of the series allowed us to establish an iterative process of evaluation and development during the series.

A significant impact on the project was the emergence and rapid up-take of social media (Web 2) technologies during 2007/08. The research team presented options for incorporating a social media component into the study as a trial audience development tool. It was decided not to embark on this new direction; however questions about social media acceptance and potential were introduced into the research framework.

Another impact was the introduction of MG's Audience Data Collection Project as an organisational priority in 2007. MG decided not to pursue the contemporary art focus of the Linkage Project as a result, and instead sought support for its statistical data collection. The UOW team provided research assistance on this initiative in return for access to data and the addition of some extra questions to the MG survey for Object during Liz Williamson: *Textiles* in 2008/09.

This management report for Object outlines the research approach and communications strategy and summarises the findings and flow-on issues for Object to consider for audience development and future research partnerships. A detailed findings report will be released in December 2010.

PROJECT STRUCTURE

| | |
|-----------|--------------------|
| ARC grant | \$150,000 |
| UOW | in-kind + \$6,000 |
| Object | in-kind + \$15,000 |
| MG NSW | in-kind + \$24,000 |

Note: Original request to ARC \$170,000. Grant includes provision for 32% oncosts for all project staff, who must be employed by UOW. Funds also covered some *Living Treasures* interpretation and documentation and MG Audience Development research costs.

2. Research Approach

LITERATURE REVIEW

The UOW team undertook an extensive national and international literature review into audience/visitor studies, mainly within Anglophone countries, 2004 – 2008.

Our findings encompass:

- scholarly research, with a focus on the development of new theoretical approaches and methodologies
- government initiatives, which mainly centre on issues of access or economic development (the UK is a leader)
- specific venue and exhibitions research and initiatives, often demographically based and frequently oriented towards museum learning (Tates Britain and Modern, the Smithsonian are leaders)

Initiatives for craft and contemporary art, where they exist, are generally focused towards marketing/product development (craft) and curatorship and new technologies (contemporary art). There remains a lack of information on the specific characteristics and responses of audiences for both craft and contemporary art. Furthermore the relative uniqueness and consistency of the NSW regional gallery sector means that there is an untapped opportunity to examine audience issues in both regional and suburban contexts, via these smaller venues, which are generally under-researched.

Much valuable information has been collected which will form a useful basis for selecting best practice examples and model approaches to audience development as part of the industry training strategy.

Living Treasures Audience Research Cycle

Les Blakeborough: Ceramics

| | |
|--------------|--|
| Sept 06 | Focus Groups - Bathurst Regional Art Gallery |
| Jan – Mar 07 | Surveys – Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery |
| Ongoing | Feedback – Venue staff |

Klaus Moje: Glass

| | |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Nov 06 – June 07 | Visitor Observation – Various Venues |
| Ongoing | Feedback – Venue staff |

Marion Hosking: Jewellery

| | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| September 7 | Research and write Text Panels |
| Dec 07 – Jan 08 | Surveys - Object |
| February 08 | Surveys – Grafton |
| September 08 | Surveys – Craft Victoria |
| Ongoing | Feedback – Venue staff |

Liz Williamson: Textiles

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| September 08 | Research and Write Text Panels |
| Dec 08 – Feb 09 | Surveys – Object, with MG Audience Dev Project |
| April 09 | Focus Groups – Bathurst Regional Art Gallery |

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research techniques were employed – observation, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, evaluative discussion with gallery staff as ‘informants’. UOW marketing researchers advised on methodologies and survey design and UOW Human Research Ethics Committee approval was sought for each stage of the research. All survey and focus group participants signed a participation consent form and were guaranteed confidentiality.

The qualitative approach, drawing on ethnographic research methodologies increasingly favoured in media audience research, provides opportunities for more finely-grained and diversified audience responses. By employing focus groups researchers could reach potential or atypical audience members such as non-gallery goers and young mothers with children. As well, focus groups targeted the inclusion of male participants and covered a broad age spectrum. The in-depth discussion combined with detailed surveys provides a rich sense of audience engagement and potential expansion that is particularly relevant in a targeted context such as Object's specialised focus on contemporary craft.

Survey and Focus Group Research framework:

Demographics

Cultural habits/ behaviours

- Visitation patterns
- Museum/gallery visits – frequency, this venue and others
- Other leisure activities
- Reasons for visit
- Regional visitors – motivation/other activities in town
- Length of visit
- Accompanied by who?
- Access issues
- Web use

Experiencing *Living Treasures*

- Why this show? How did you learn about it?
- Length of visit
- Likes/dislikes
- Emotional key words/triggers to describe response
- Information/educational value
- Spatial issues – layout/pathways in gallery
- Interpretive material – effectiveness

Viewing contemporary craft

- Expectations/understanding of contemporary craft exhibitions
- Awareness of Object/Living Treasures series of exhibitions
- Merchandising/pricing
- Motivators to return/other exhibitions you'd like to see

MG AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT STUDY

This study, funded by the Australia Council, is the first to be undertaken on this scale in NSW and is running over 3 years; during 2007-09 it covered public galleries in Western Sydney, Central Coast/ Hunter region and metropolitan Sydney. The *Sydney Metro Region* findings, which included Object, were released in August 2009 in the *Guess Who's Going to the Gallery?* report. It revealed great diversity in audience profile for different venues, but indicated high proportions of older female visitors,

of regular gallery goers and centrally-located visitors. Specific data collected for Object is in line with much of this profile, with a low tourist profile and high average income levels. The regional and Western Suburbs profiles differed slightly, particularly with a high number of first-time visitors and diversity of income. This presents some interesting contrasts for Object in terms of its audience reach with touring exhibitions that move across regional and metropolitan venues.

CONTEMPORARY ART

The Australia Council's The Great Indoors remains one of the few comprehensive studies into audiences for contemporary art. On publication, it appeared that the ‘attitude clusters’ it identified – such as irrelevant, alienated, positive – are not particularly translatable or useful for considering contemporary craft audience responses, and the research findings of this project on craft audiences corroborate this view. The contemporary art research component of this project was limited, after negotiations with MG. However the research encompassed a focus on young audiences and contemporary art at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and a focus on Hazelhurst Regional Gallery's contemporary art program with a survey undertaken during the *Our Lucky Country* exhibition. Two UOW Honours students also completed their theses on contemporary art audiences during the project. This research showed, overall, strong engagement with contemporary art as a learning experience.

VIEWING CONTEMPORARY ART

Hazelhurst Regional Gallery - *Our Lucky Country*

To inform the contemporary art component of the project we conducted a survey of this contemporary art exhibition which was commissioned by and exhibited at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery during Dec 07-Jan 08.

Our findings can be summarised as follows:

- Mostly female audience, over 35.
- A significant portion of the audience expressed some resistance to contemporary, or more generally termed as ‘modern’, art and prefer ‘traditional’ painting.
- There was however also in evidence a core of regular visitors who enjoy seeing new approaches and ideas and finding out about artists whose work they don't know. This group used terms like ‘fresh’.
- There was a heavy reliance on text panels for information, particularly as very few visitors had heard of any of the artists before.
- Yet 37% of visitors did not feel that they learnt anything new at the exhibition.
- Younger visitors were much more likely to utilise the internet for information.

From observation, visitors spent considerably longer in this exhibition than in the *Living Treasures* exhibitions. *Our Lucky Country* was a complex show with a variety of media and artists and socially engaged themes developed from the Cronulla riots. There was very little signage, no larger introductory panels and the text panels were more or less lifted straight from the catalogue. This was a curatorial rather than educational or venue decision and it clearly impacted on the learning experience.

3. Research findings

LIVING TREASURES

LES BLAKEBOROUGH: CERAMICS

Focus groups at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery were followed by surveys at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Four focus groups of 5 or 6 participants each included a group of women with young children, a number of non-gallery goers and males, and a *craft specialist group*, all either hobby or professional ceramic artists, who were attending a public program with Blakeborough. At Hobart, visitors were fairly regular gallery goers, 57% female, nearly all over 35 and very enthusiastic about the exhibition. Most of them read text panels during the exhibition and almost none were aware of Object or the monograph. The museum and capital city venue showed a greater diversity in gender than was apparent at any other venue during the entire project, yet other findings were generally similar. One notable gender difference was that males often make more comments about technique.



An exhibition highlight - Les Blakeborough

KLAUS MOJE: GLASS

Because of overlap with the Blakeborough show, findings and research were not integrated into this exhibition. We observed visitors at 3 of the touring venues and from this and from informal responses, it was clear that the explanatory video was highly successful. This compensated for text panels which were not designed for the audience so much as summarised from the catalogue and which some audience members considered to have overly long sentences etc. Like Blakeborough, the work had a very strong aesthetic and skill component that was clearly appreciated by audiences. The glass community is not as extensive as the ceramics, and more clearly professionalised, so the audience issues are slightly different – the concept of 'craft specialist' audience is very specific for glass.



Reading text panels at Object Gallery - Klaus Moje

MARIAN HOSKING: JEWELLERY

This exhibition was launched in Sydney in December 07 and has had an extensive tour. We researched and wrote the text panels for the exhibition, responding to findings to date. Key features of the panels were: inclusion and profiling of the artist's voice; simple language; narrative structure within each panel; mentioning one specific work in each label; discussing technique. An a/v was a central part of the large installation. Object addressed some of its identity issues through labels and signage. Surveys were conducted at Object, Grafton Regional Gallery and Craft Victoria's gallery in Melbourne. Visits to this exhibition were short (20-30 minutes); visitors relied on text panels for information and found that they delivered well. At the two craft galleries visitors showed some awareness of the monograph and of Object; at Grafton there was low awareness.



Before the show - Marian Hosking

LIZ WILLIAMSON: TEXTILES

We returned to Bathurst to run 3 focus groups for this exhibition with a total of 15 participants. The ages ranged evenly from 21 to over 55 and 28% were male. More than half had incomes under \$30,000, there was a mix of occupations, mostly professional. The majority would not have visited this exhibition if not for the focus group invitation, citing reasons from not knowing that it was on to 'craft has an image problem'. Once in the gallery, they enjoyed the experience: it 'pushed the boundaries out, I liked it'. Again, visitors read the text panels and found them useful; interestingly they found the small, detailed labels for individual works 'too much information'. This exhibition elicited a strong response around technique and tactility. The text panels were developed with an overarching narrative about the artist's life and work, and this was positively received. At Object, where MG added some specific questions authored by the UOW team to its general survey, the audience was more knowledgeable about both the artist and techniques, and slightly less focused on the interpretive material or found it slightly less useful.

Touring challenges



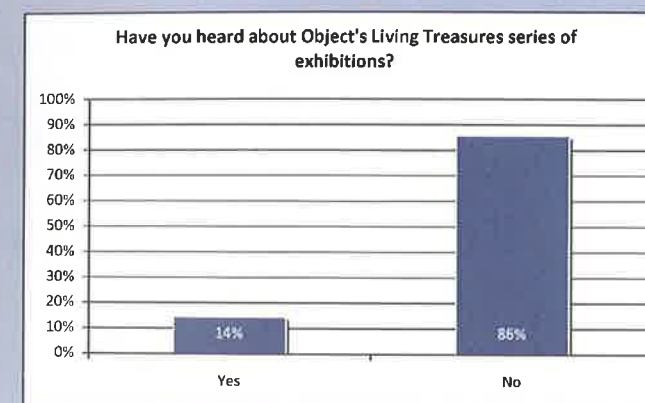
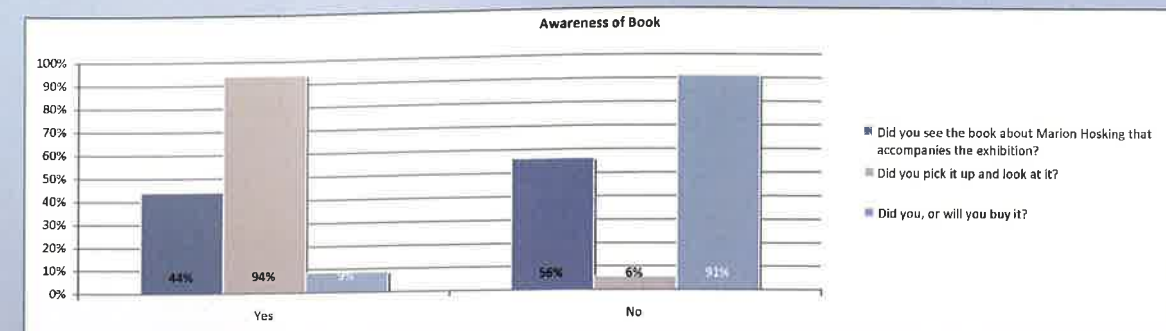
Entering the exhibition: Liz Williamson



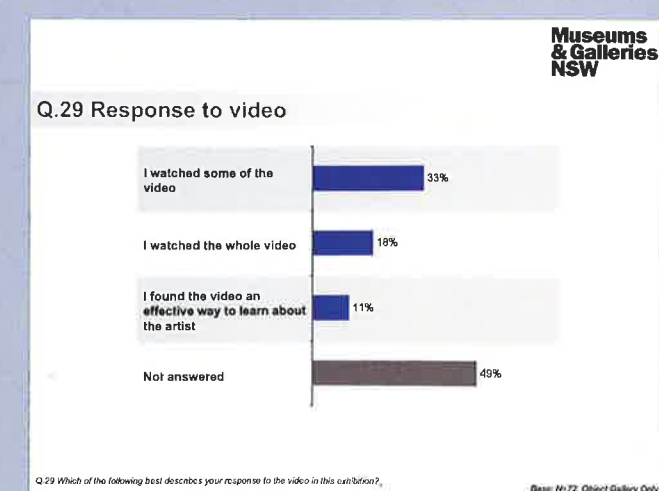
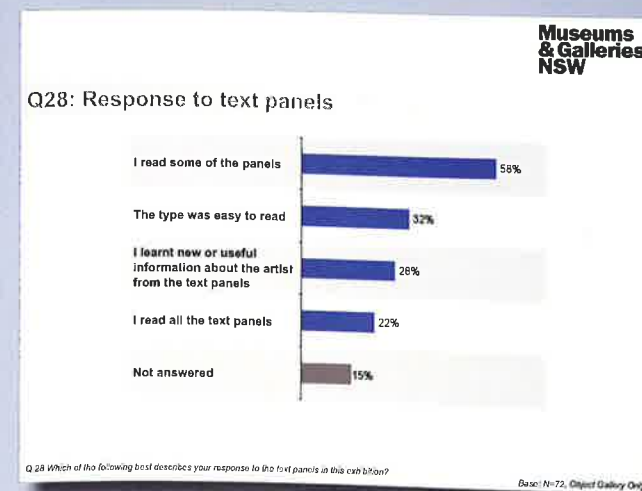
Merchandising: Liz Williamson

SAMPLE SURVEY DATA

Marian Hosking at Grafton



Liz Williamson at Object - MG extra questions



DEMOGRAPHICS

Living Treasures on tour and at Object is reaching audiences who speak English at home and are mostly female and well over 35. MG's data from its Object survey supports this finding, with the addition that most visitors surveyed had an above average income. There is strong evidence from the focus group work that when men visit one of these exhibitions they enjoy the experience, often more than they anticipated, and are particularly focused on the skills and techniques evident in the work. the concept of 'craft specialist' audience is very specific for glass.

CULTURAL HABITS AND BEHAVIOURS

Living Treasures visitors and visitors to Object tend to visit galleries at least 2 or 3 times a year, often large metropolitan galleries such as the National Gallery of Australia. They are literate, confident with venues and interpretive material and looking for spiritually uplifting or educational experiences when they visit a gallery.

EXPERIENCING LIVING TREASURES

Visits to these exhibitions are fairly short (20-3 minutes), they include reading text panels, and they are a positive experience. There is no doubt that Object is creating a successful gallery experience for metropolitan and regional audiences with this exhibition series, delivering new and interesting exhibitions with some distinctive features. There is also no doubt that the living treasures themselves – the artists – are not well known and that there is a sense of discovery for both regular and infrequent gallery goers when they encounter them. Technique and beauty are the twin poles around which audience responses to specific works, or series of works, of contemporary craft tend to cluster.

FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD

In our field discussions with professional venue staff, we found that the *Living Treasures* exhibitions were:

- Easy to install with clear instructions; Object staff assisting with install is much appreciated
- Mid-ranking exhibition numbers-wise
- Taps into craft specialist audience niches
- Not particularly easy to publicise
- Affected by what it was shown with in multi-exhibition venues; themed co-programming works well
- Most effective when public programs were taking place, especially when the artist was present
- Successful with venue staff as an all-round experience.
- Basically the monographs only sold when the artist was present for a special program
- Venues collected only the most basic attendance data and were not able to support their opinions on the exhibition's success with anything other than anecdotal evidence which at times, on closer examination, was not reliable.

LES BLAKEBOROUGH: CERAMICS

Bathurst Focus Groups

Overall people found the work exquisite and Les Blakeborough's mastery of his craft spoke for itself. The work that was specially lit was repeatedly referred to as 'stunning' or 'divine'. One of the participants, a farmer, who never attends art galleries and has never seen a craft show of this kind, loved the work and enthused: 'how did he get them so perfect?'. The *craft specialist group* was particularly well-informed about this exhibition and was notably more involved in attending galleries, tended to use the web for information and were keen to participate in the public program with Blakeborough. Few of the other participants would have decided to visit the exhibition had they not been invited to join a focus group.

Positive responses fell into two main descriptors:

Technical: Skilled/mastery

Spiritual: Sublime/exquisite

Constant themes were:

- Bringing children perceived as a problem (suggested activity 'touch and feel' corner)
- Indifferent or negative reception to interpretive material – typeface too small, panels too long to read to the end.
- Demand for more information about Blakeborough 'the man'
- Mixed response to exhibition lighting and design
- Overall enthusiasm for idea of a 'highlight' work
- Confusion about the relationship (and naming) between the book and the show.
- No awareness of Object (except for craft specialists) or of MG at all
- No awareness of monograph (except for craft specialists)
- Limited web use for information on this show or any other (except for craft specialists)

4. Considerations for Object: Audiences and Touring

AUDIENCE FOCUS

In general we have noted a mixed, slightly haphazard approach to interpretation and audience focus in the sector. It is not clear from our work to date that many of the galleries are 'audience-focused organizations' nor that they place education and life-long learning formally at the core of their work. However, the capacity of many staff to work intuitively or informally with their communities and audiences on these approaches, based on on-the-ground experience, should not be underestimated.

Object has a distinctive set of audience characteristics and issues: through its extensive touring program it is reaching large numbers of people nationally and providing quality experiences in viewing contemporary craft and design. Balancing this leadership role, especially if it is to realize the great potential of these exhibitions to develop new audiences both for venues and for craft and design media, with the many other demands on the organisation presents a challenge for future strategic focus and planning.

INTEPRETATION, TACTILITY, TECHNIQUE AND THE ARTIST

Lots of people want to touch craft objects when they are in the gallery space. They want to know how things are made and they like to find out about what motivates the artist, emotionally, aesthetically and physically. Clear information panels with engaging text are a critical interpretation tool. A/V is also important but should be carefully placed.

TO TOUR OR NOT? IMAGE AND IDENTITY

It has emerged that with a touring exhibition there is a complex mix of audience response to a venue and to the show itself – and a potential loss of control by the touring originator. There is also a considerable investment of time and energy in touring. These are issues for Object and the sector in general to consider in terms of audience objectives, tour management and allocation of resources. There are merchandising, long-term relationship building and possible sponsorship opportunities that can be further developed through Object's touring programs. Does Object want to keep touring? If so, what does it want to achieve through this commitment? What are the key strategies and approaches to realising Object's touring aims?

CRAFT AND THE SPECIALIST

There is a clear distinction between craft specialist audiences and general audience. The craft specialists share some characteristics with frequent gallery goers – they use the internet more for information gathering and they are much more aware of the 'apparatus' around the exhibition – programs, Object, the monograph – than general visitors. *Living Treasures* as a series and the specific craft exhibition venues such as Object and Craft Victoria are providing valuable services and experiences for this audience group, which can be further divided into medium-specific segments. Public programs and targeted events are an excellent way to reach this group and communications can be specifically designed so as to expand on its potential.

CRAFT AND THE WEB

The dispersed, national audience for *Living Treasures* and the specific media specialist and student interests of the various exhibitions lend themselves to the potential for networking and interaction that social media networks provide. The research findings show demonstrable, if not overwhelming, interest in this and it can be considered a core element of audience development in the contemporary environment – complementing and augmenting actual exhibition visits if not an end in itself. This is a communication strategy that Object can explore in the context of its overall, ongoing development of web communications.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS 2007

Aesthetic

1. Design a 'touch' display into the exhibitions
2. Design a 'highlight' display focus where possible into each exhibition to maximise impact and create a sense of consistency across venues

Education/Interpretation

3. Include A/V material in each exhibition
4. Work with UOW research team on new approaches to text panel interpretation, to be introduced with *Living Treasures 3*
5. Discuss issues of child access with venues to develop strategies (could include interpretive trail, activity corner)

Marketing and Communications

6. Create a stronger on-site brand for Object and promote the monograph more effectively through designing a portable merchandising stand for each venue; negotiate placement with venues as part of touring agreement. Use the stand to promote the magazine and other product
7. Develop a selection of merchandise from Object shop for gallery shops, with prominent labelling as an option for venues
8. Develop a comprehensive media kit for touring, including focus on dual response (technical/contemplative)

Target Audience Development Strategy

9. Investigate launching a social networking 'Web 2' site to accompany *Living Treasures*, possibly in partnership with Craft Australia

5. Project Outcomes Plan

Findings from the project have been incorporated into industry debate and discussion, including shaping MG's Audience Development Strategy and presentations at two National Public Galleries Summit conferences:

- 'Voices from the regions: challenges and strategies', 2009 Australasian Public Galleries Summit, Townsville. Keynote address by Amanda Lawson
- 'Theories of leadership', 2005 Australian Public Galleries Summit, Wagga Wagga. Keynote address by Amanda Lawson. Research team contributed to conference program development with planning masterclasses on audience development and leadership.

Following preparation of this management report and the accompanying findings report in December 2010, the research findings will be disseminated in a range of industry and academic forums, such as The Inclusive Museum conference, Johannesburg, June 2011 and at the Museums Australia national conference, May 2011 and articles in refereed journals such as *Curator* and *Visual Culture Studies*.

There is considerable interest in the qualitative aspect of the research project in the regional and public gallery sector in Australia. UOW researchers are working with MG, the NSW Public Galleries Association and the Australia Council on an industry development forum focusing on models of audience research with a hands-on workshop component for implementation in March 2011. This will include segments on targeting craft audiences and working on effective touring exhibition development.

Up to \$10,000 of funding is still available for allocation to costs for Object in integrating the research findings into the organisation, or on refining or focusing on an aspect of the research. The UOW research team would welcome the opportunity of working with Object on this and identifying the most effective way to take up the findings from the project within its unique profile and operating context.

6. Research Partnerships

The research process has revealed a range of results which can deliver meaningful contributions to organisational and sector development as well as contribute to academic knowledge in the growing field of visitor studies. This Linkage Project was a first for the SME group of NSW, and probably Australian, public galleries. It was also a first for the UOW research team. As such, it is a useful model for evaluation and to shape future research collaborations; the following comments are offered in this context.

Embarking on a research partnership is a significant commitment for all partners. Developing a project with more than one research partner means negotiating differing organisational priorities and requirements, which can lead to a change in or diffusion of focus. Staffing changes in partner organisations can have a significant impact on the positioning or delivery of the project. Similarly, the academic research team is subject to changing work patterns and priorities as well as changes in staffing. With the current project, these issues had an impact on aspects of the project delivery, leading to changes in direction and a longer lead-time in writing up and disseminating results.

Paramount to the success of research partnerships is the need to set in place a strong project management framework, focused on both setting and monitoring goals and objectives and on practical elements such as timelines. Since small organisations have limited capacity to direct resources or staffing to long-term, semi-external projects such as a Linkage Project, it is all the more important for a project to be assessed thoroughly for its scope, feasibility and engagement with the organisation's core business and strategic directions. The project needs to be durable beyond individual interests and connections. The organisation's capacity to take up and work with the anticipated research results is another important element for consideration.

Options which could be considered to facilitate project management include: limited-term placement of research assistants within the organisation; allocating specific periods of time in which the project is prioritised; or setting up project management and reporting systems that are well-understood and utilised by all participants. The benefits of having a postgraduate student undertaking research while partially based in the organisation could be considerable, particularly if she or he were to be a mature professional undertaking a higher degree. SME arts organisations could also consider the benefits of shorter-term contract research in contrast to the larger but more diffuse Linkage structure.