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FRAMING THE MUSEUM
the evolution of the museum as an encoded site of interpretation and display

by Craig Judd

There are many codes that swirl around the museum.

There are codes that relate to the creation of culture, history and tradition.
There are codes that relate to the activities and roles of the artist.
There are also codes that relate to language and the senses.
While adopting a broad historical framework for this text, there will be a concentration on explaining some of the experiences that we can gain in the contemporary art environment, more specifically the contemporary art museum.

Another framework for this text is a journey through the history of art.
I touch upon prehistoric acts of collection, to ideas of treasure and its holding place -the treasury, then to often-quirky private collections, the rooms of wonders and curiosities (Wunderkammer or Kunstkammern). There is also mention of the development of private collections that have a more scientific basis but the main concentration is the realm of the public museum.

In the last 30 years hundreds of museums have been built. There are many different types of museum as there are different types of history. In Australia there are buildings that house the local historical societies collections to more commercial enterprises like the Ned Kelly Museum at Glenrowan in Victoria. There are historic houses such as Norman Lindsay's home in Springwood or the more recently built Bundanon studio complex donated by Arthur Boyd to the people of Australia. There are also such institutions as the Museum of Sydney built on the site of the first Government House in New South Wales or the extraordinary Percy Grainger Museum associated with the University of Melbourne. In North Sydney there is the pilgrimage chapel and shrine dedicated to the Blessed Sister Mary Mackillop the founder of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. In the last twenty years there has also been an expansion of the system of regional art galleries that serve communities outside the metropolitan centres. One of the oldest regional galleries in New South Wales is the Tamworth Regional Gallery, which was founded in 1919. Most of these smaller museums operate around the efforts and commitment of teams of dedicated volunteers.

Many museums exist before the collections that they are meant to house. Some museums, like the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris or the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao are founded as mechanisms for economic growth and urban renewal.

The word "museum" is derived from the name given to sacred shrines dedicated to the Muses. They are the goddesses who preside over and inspire the arts. The Muses were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (memory). Originally three in number- Melete(meditation), Mneme (memory) and Aoede(song) there numbers eventually ballooned to nine to encompass the breadth of the arts in antiquity. (Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyphymia, Terpsichore, Thalia and Urania).In Graeco Roman times the Muses were followers of Apollo. He was the god of prophecy, healing and artistic and musical inspiration. Meditation, entertainment and inspiration, are still primary functions of the museum space and the objects housed within it.

There is another way to conceptualise the contemporary museum.
The museum is a zombie. A voodoo creature, half-dead and half-alive. Inside the museums' body, inside this organism there are objects and forms that sometimes come alive.

Through our proximity with the objects in this container we make these objects live. These objects are kept like the zombie to be constantly revivified…
We are the witch doctors who make the objects in the art museum come alive. The objects become alive by magic, by the force of our will.

Today, many museums don't look like museums at all. They are temples to different gods. Frank Lloyd Wright's Guugenheim Museum in New York is the building that is said to begin the trend. The Centre Georges Pompidou designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano looks like some sort of mysterious factory. Frank Gehry who designed the Bilbao Guggenheim also designed the extraordinary Experience Music Project (2000) building in Seattle. Gehry said he was inspired to design the swaying and swooping folds of aluminium cladding by listening to the music of Jimmy Hendrix. It is open to debate whether this building is the visual embodiment of rock and roll.

The exteriors and interiors of a building often suggest a certain sort of experience.
So what is the experience of a museum? We go to encounter collections of objects. All cultures collect. Collection seems a part of human nature. An instinct for ownership and a tendency towards hoarding materials of some sort defines most cultures. There is evidence from Palaeolithic times that humans have carefully kept and preserved a range of non-utilitarian objects (for example, shaped and coloured stones, shells etc). The experience of the museum revolves around our gaze and our bodies. The objects in a museum are somehow a strange mirror of our own personal histories but they also suggest the histories of other people, even nations, other times and epochs. Museums contain objects that are said to be precious. As objects they are said to have Significance and Value. Sometimes this significance and value is often hard to discern or to decipher. Museums prompt the question, "what makes something art?"

Originally ideas of what was precious and special and beautiful and valuable revolved around our bodies. We could mark, enhance decorate, our bodies that our bodies that we could. Sometimes these markings are related to the community, to sexual drives and to ritual. Ritual and Community are very important issues in the experience of the contemporary art museum. The main rituals connected to the beginnings of art are burial and fertility rituals. In tombs and temples goods were stored and kept. To assuage the gods, it is only right and fitting to make objects that are rendered or made as finely as possible. These offerings to the gods were displayed in or near the temple. More fragile and less valuable offerings were usually buried in the precincts of the temple thus maintaining their sacredness.

The standard history of the modern, Eurocentric museum begins in the Graeco-Roman period. The Greeks and Romans created inventories objects; eventually these lists would include descriptions of the most elaborate items.

With the rise of empires comes a different set of imperatives for art. The idealism of Classical Greek art was made specifically to show the enemy what they are not and what they could not be. Classical Greek art was made specifically to differentiate the victors of the war from its enemies. In this case the Athenian dictatorship against the Persians, those who were defeated.

In the Hellenistic period in the cities of Asia Minor there were collections of art made and displayed for public enjoyment. The richest and most important of these civic collections was housed the city of Pergamon. In 133 BCE, the city decided to bequeath itself to the Romans, rather than to be conquered, the city destroyed and the collection of art to be dispersed. This bequest to the Roman Empire is a key event in the history of culture. Here was a repository of objects both originals and fine copies made in classical mode or classical style that became a veritable template for all public artefacts in the Roman Empire, that is for the next eight centuries. So, from Scotland to Africa to the Black Sea, each city had its own collection of objects that were displayed in the forum, in the local town square. These were images and statues of gods and state and local heroes. Many of these works owed their style and finish to the collection of Pergamon. It is Ironic that one of the most impressive artefacts of the Hellenistic period, the facade of the Great Altar of Zeus from Pergamon, was excavated in 1886 and is now housed in a museum in Berlin.

During Antiquity plunder by individuals becomes celebrated. With greater contacts between different peoples collecting becomes a fashion. Julius Caesar and Caius Verres had celebrated collections. Vitruvius the famous Roman architect cum engineer designed a space specifically for the display of paintings and sculptures. Such private collections often had different contents to the works on display to the public in the local forum.

Part of the museum's purpose is display and spectacle.

With the rise of Christianity, there arises a different set of standards and contents for art and for objects associated with cult and ritual. In the Medieval period the devotion to relics was an important social and economic force. The relics of the saints and holy people were made more elaborate with precious metals and jewels. Before the eleventh century relics were generally kept in crypts and on occasion revealed to the congregation. The fashion for Pilgrimage created the need for larger spaces to safely and efficiently house the devotees and the relics that they wished to encounter. The Gothic style allowed for the general public to move in and around the relics that were now placed in side chapels and displayed all year round, without disturbing the other religious services occurring in the church.

The notion of the journey is a very important aspect of the museum experience. Like medieval pilgrims we travel around objects and through the different spaces of the museum.

In the medieval period the nobility amassed vast treasures. Quite often they were meticulously catalogued. Charles V of France had 3,906 items on his inventory. Such collections of precious goods were rarely shown publicly. When they were shown it was for the assertion of political power and might. Those viewing the treasure were meant to be overwhelmed, to be filled with awe.

Around the late thirteenth century, more people began collecting art works and curiosities. In small rooms lined with cupboards and drawers, objects were amassed. These objects were seen to have their own light and their own magic. The spaces where such objects were held were called rooms of wonder or, "wunderkammer". Another name was "kunstkammern". Generally the objects in the wunderkammer were small enough to be held in the hand to be closely perused. The random juxtaposition of disparate objects was primarily meant to amuse and entertain rather than instruct or uplift. The objects so kept were virtuosic examples of the hand of nature (read God) or man. Sometimes natural forms were enhanced by human hands to be made more exotic. There was a taste for the bizarre; crystals, shells, horns, claws and teeth of various animals were popular items.

By the sixteenth century kunstkammern or wunderkammer could also include paintings and sculptures, jewels and scientific apparatuses. They were small private museums open only to the friends and family or to interested scholars. By collecting objects such as these, the owner was aspiring to current ideas of economic, social and intellectual prestige. Issues of prestige are very important for in understanding some of the roles of the museum.

In the Renaissance it was fashionable to collect antiquities from the Roman Empire. Princely families would vie with each other for the possession of newly discovered cameos, coins, ceramics and sculpture from antiquity. In 1503 Pope Julius II commissioned the architect Bramante to design the Belvedere court, a garden setting for his collection of Roman and Hellenistic sculpture. The Medici in Florence also employed loggia, pavilions and grottoes to display their collections. Designed as places for inspiration, these gardens were never intended for the public. They were only available to the invited.

However the fad for collecting antiques spread quickly throughout Europe in the sixteenth century. Hubert Golz compiled a list of collectors on his travels between 1556 an 1560. The list of 978 names shows a broad range of occupations and class from cardinals and monks to jurists and physicians, scholars, artists and poets.

The first recognisably modern museums in the true sense of the word are the Uffizi in Florence and the Fontainbleau Palace in France. The Uffizi was designed by Giorgio Vasari

(1511-1574) for Cosimo de Medici while Rosso Fiorentino and Sebastiano Serlio designed the galleries at Fontainebleau Palace.

The word Uffizi means *the offices*. The Uffizi is a series of long halls and large rooms designed for meetings and dinners and other public activities. The spaces are big enough to display objects that are too large to be held in the human hand. Such objects demand that the audience be able to walk around to gain a complete understanding of the form and content of the piece. Such pieces were often designed to deliberately to overwhelm the viewer by their scale, by their content and by the virtuosity of their making. This more spectacular framework for viewing art was an interesting compromise. In the sixteenth century these long large corridors also known as galleries (or galleria) were also used to take exercise and the art on display was as much placed there to distract people in much the same way people in gyms watch TV or listen to their walkmans. At Fontainebleau Palace François 1, the king would take his favoured guests and ambassadors to view his collection of antiquities, which were then housed in the bathroom cum sauna of Fontainebleau. This location would cause alarm today however at the time it was not considered unusual to combine the pleasures of the mind with the pleasures and healthy relaxation of the body!

From the sixteenth century into the eighteenth century different types of collections were established. These collections were motivated by the European expansion outside of Europe. As a consequence, there is the rise of museums specialising in the different forms of natural history. There are museums of medicine, of insects, of shells, of botany and zoology. Such museums in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century attempted a more scientific and methodical approach to acquisition and collection development. For example the Jesuit priest, Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680) was the first to develop a museum with what would be now called an ethnographic or anthropological bias. He specialised in the collection Oriental, Egyptian and New World items.

Many museums were designed as adjuncts to teaching and learning institutions. For example one of the most spectacular scientific museums in the world is the museum of La Specola in Florence. This was linked to the university there. Oxford University exhibited a collection donated by Elias Ashmole in 1683 for the exclusive use of students. Later this collection was made available to a wider public. The Capitoline Museum, Rome, was founded by the papacy but opened in 1734 to the growing numbers of international tourists. In 1743 Anna Maria Luisa de Medici donated her family's collection to the State of Tuscany on express condition of its total accessibility to the general public. This generous donation became the model for many subsequent bequests.

From the 1700's private and public collections become more closely linked. The museum environment not only began to provide the private collector with expertise to conserve, document and research their collections but also tantalisingly offered a location to preserve their collections forever. If such preservation occurred the collectors tastes would then be forever memorialised and the personal collection often lovingly compiled and refined over decades would maintain its integrity, its totality.

A famous example of this process is to be seen in the collection that is now housed in the Dulwich Picture Gallery outside London. In 1790 two friends, Noël Desenfans and Sir Francis Bourgeois were commissioned to form a collection from scratch for Stanislaus Augustus the King of Poland. This Royal Collection was to be for the encouragement of the arts in that country. For the next five years Desanfans, his wife Margaret Morris and Bourgeois devoted themselves to the task of gathering together what was considered to be the best art of the time. Unfortunately, during this time Prussia, Russia and Austria were partitioning Poland. By 1795 Poland had ceased to exist.

Desanfans and Bourgeois undeterred, set about selling some pieces while augmenting the collection with other works. The pair approached the British Museum to find a possible final resting-place for the collection but the institution (British Museum) was not particularly interested. Desenfans and his wife bequeathed the collection to Bourgeois on condition that neither him nor his wife be buried. The Dulwich Picture gallery was founded by the terms of Sir Francis Bourgeois' will in 1811. Sir John Soane was invited to design the gallery where

their collection was to be permanently exhibited close by to the Mausoleum where the remains of Bourgeois, Desenfans and Morris are also preserved. Soane was mindful of the experience of the first time visitor and aimed to make the gallery as "user friendly" as possible by making the exhibition spaces intimate and hospitable. The building was completed in 1824. It is the United Kingdom's first public art gallery. Soane's sequence of rooms has been the inspiration for the layout of many contemporary museums including the J.Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Sir John Soane (1753-1837) was also a passionate collector himself. In 1833 he persuaded friends in Parliament to pass an act that preserved this eclectic collection for the use of amateurs and scholars. In 1837 his house and contents were bequeathed to the state for the benefit of the people of England.

Throughout the eighteenth century in France England, Germany and Spain, the general public, not just nobles were slowly being allowed in to view art and collections. In France in the 1740's some members of the general public gained access into the Salon d'Apollo to view art made at the state art school, the Ecole des Beaux Arts. The school's competition of the Prix de Rome quickly became an important social event. Conversations of the audience at such gatherings were recorded to become some of the earliest art criticism.

This introduces another link in the series of organic relations around the museum, which are the roles of the critic or cultural commentator recording their opinions for public delectation. In a sense one of the key roles of the critic is to activate the public to the relevance and importance of the contents of the museum. It is important to note that without the general public talking about art, creating dialogue and discussion, there would not be contemporary art.

The first modern public museum is the Louvre that was opened in 1790.

Throughout the nineteenth century there was a great deal of concern about the role of art in the new modern society engendered by the Industrial Revolutions. How could art reflect the prestige of the state in this time of great social, intellectual and technological change?
It was in this time that there arose more sophisticated ideas developed around art's ability to order consciousness both the consciousness of the individual and of the nation.

From the early 1800's there is an explosive growth of the client base for art. Indeed the role of the middle classes and the sating of their burgeoning desires is a major part of the history of the museum. Enlightenment rationality prompted philanthropic gentlemen and gentlewomen to donate their private collections to the state. Private collections were donated to the state for benefit of the people of the state.

It was thought that by donating collections to the state, people could somehow learn and somehow be socially morally and ethically improved by contact with the artefacts. Art was viewed partly as a form of purposeful entertainment but also as a sort of quasi-religious experience.

Utopian dreams are an important element of the inspired Enlightenment mindset.

The nineteenth century experienced an explosion of museum and gallery building. The often-desperate acquisitive tendency of European culture becomes quite clear in the expansion into the Americas, Asia and Australia. The acquisitive nature of European culture meant that more places had to be built to hold what was acquired. Artefacts from other cultures began to be thought to encapsulate elements of or even to symbolically stand for the entirety of that "other" culture. Contemporary art museums have developed sophisticated ways of display to underline this idea that objects have certain textual base or are containers of information waiting to be unlocked or deciphered. Artists such as the Gorilla Girls, Sherry Levine, Barbara Kruger, Haim Steinbach and Fiona Hall are some of the many contemporary artists who challenge such assumptions. These artists meditate on such issues as consumption and desire and the constructions value and authority of history. One of the great ironies of this sort

of agitprop art is the audience for this art, who go and see this work in the museum environment are already converted or at least sympathetic to the causes presented n the art.

The nineteenth century obsession with information, with taxonomies created the need for purpose built structures to contain these knowledge systems. Vast amounts of stuff needed to be stored, registered, and sometimes be displayed. The use of the word "stuff" is deliberate, because there is a marked correlation between the development of the department store and the art gallery/museum as both share similar functions. "Stuff" was the name given to cotton goods and fabric that formed the bulk of trade in the early part of the Industrial Revolutions of the nineteenth century. The department store and the museum are designed to create a special and unique sense of grandeur and spectacle for the audience. Both institutions use the most advanced techniques of lighting and display to enhance the objects within the audience's gaze. However the art/gallery museum must be traditionally set apart from the taint of the marketplace. One way to achieve this separation from the ebb and flow of ordinary life is to conjure up the classical style. From the National Gallery of Berlin to the Art Gallery of New South Wales countless museum buildings around the world have facades that re-present an idea of ancient Greek temples.

Classicism is also invoked as a way to underline the seemingly permanent and universal values of the objects held within the walls of the museum. Art came to be seen to represent ideas of stability and perfection. Truth and Beauty, those culturally specific, but also very slippery terms are meant to reside in the museum as well. So in the nineteenth century the museum art/gallery becomes a bastion or fortress for those values. So it is not difficult then to understand the a scandalous affront to notions of social and intellectual decorum that Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* caused when exhibited at the Salon in 1865. While broadly ascribing to the public taste for illusionist narrative, this painting presented an image of a naked woman staring blankly at the viewer. What caused offence was that Manet had not attempted to disguise the contemporary content of the work with classically inspired heroic gestures and grand rhetoric. How could *Olympia* a painting of a rather plain and common working girl improve and instruct the general public?

It is ironic that just as ideas about the role and function of art and it's holding place, the museum /art gallery become more fixed, there emerges at the same time, a new and different role for the artist. Artists are no longer family retainers to noble families but become independent producers making work for a shifting market. Partly as a result of Enlightenment thinking and partly as a result of changes in patronage due to the growth of the middle classes, artists become more reactive, more personal, and more individual in their commentaries of the world and their experience in the world. The careers of Fransisco Goya and William Blake are good examples of this shift. Although many of their works were initially designed for a private audience they quickly became part of state collections.
More advanced forms of contemporary art in the nineteenth century emphasised the re-presentation or translation of the individual experience of the world, and in particular the metropolis. During this time visions and experiences of women become more common in the world of art. Berthe Morrisot, Mary Cassatt, Julia Margaret Cameron and Paula Modersohn Becker, are artists who make striking contributions to what then a still male dominated profession. (After all by tradition it is only men that can be geniuses!). In Australia, the works of Georgiana MacCrae, Ruby Lind, Jane Sutherland and Agnes Goodsir and Violet Teague are now slowly being recognised as essential elements of the canon of Australian art history. Joan Kerr's *Heritage* is a marvellous source book of information about the role of women in the development of Australian culture.

Even though art was deemed an eminently suitable servant of the state, by the end of the nineteenth century, many official museums were collecting works of art that were deemed 'radical' because of the youthful makers, their manner of working and the problematic content of their art. It is hard to imagine now that there was some vociferous opposition to the acquisition of works by Conder, Streeton, Lambert and Roberts!

In the late nineteenth century there are also more and more donations of works to the state museum. Benefactors become very important to galleries and museum existence. It would have been good, for example, if John Peter Russell had, in fact, bought up a collection of late

nineteenth century art by his friends Van Gogh and Monet and brought it back to Australia. That was his dream. Unfortunately he didn't do it. However In Melbourne there were great philanthropists such as Alfred Felton and John Grimwade who made spectacular contributions to development the National Gallery of Victoria. In Sydney there is J.F Archibald and more recently Margaret Olley and John and Julia Schaeffer.

By the beginning of the twentieth century is the recognition by museum and curators that the art exhibition can be a social and intellectual catalyst. At the end of the twentieth century this is a role adopted with some gusto by certain cultural institutions. The rise of the "blockbuster exhibition has added weight to this activity.

A brief history of blockbuster exhibitions now follows. The most important of these blockbuster exhibitions are the 1911 and 1913 Post Impressionist exhibitions organised at the Grafton Galleries in London by Roger Fry. Roger Fry was the person who decided to call everything made from Manet through Seurat to Gauguin was "post impressionist". It's a very difficult label but that's Fry the curators Legacy. In 1913 the Armory show, a large-scale exhibition of recent European and American art travelled to New York, Boston and Chicago. The scandal of the New York exhibition was Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* while in Chicago it was a painting of a nude by Henri Matisse that caused anxiety in certain areas of the general public. The Dada exhibition of Berlin in 1920 is often cited to be very important because of its influence amongst artists. The International Surrealist Exhibition in London of 1936 was similarly influential. It was in 1939 that Australia had it's first international contemporary art exhibition, the Herald Art Exhibition. The year before, an exhibition organised in Sydney by Grace Crowley, was the first totally non-objective abstract exhibition held in Australia.

An important art event is the foundation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929. The first curator of Modern Art there was Alfred H.. Barr. The word curator originally meant a keeper, a registrar of objects in that collection. However, Alfred H. Barr became a tastemaker. Much of our understanding of contemporary art revolves around Alfred H. Barr's views about what was best. The notion that contemporary art is an ever upward, ever onward progression emerging from Cubism is developed by Alfred H. Barr in the exhibitions and works that he acquired for the Museum of Modern Art.

However, in terms of the blockbuster, the most successful art exhibition, to date, is the Degenerate Art exhibition organised by the Nazis that was on tour around Germany from 1938 to 1942. The Degenerate Art exhibition was designed specifically to devalue and deride contemporary art. The German word "entartete" means a sort of biological deformation and this idea of biological deformation was linked erroneously to what the Nazis thought to be a Jewish conspiracy in the promotion of contemporary art.

The Degenerate Art exhibition had four million visitors. No art exhibition to date has succeeded that '"bums on seats" statistic. While obviously not drawing any link between these two exhibitions, in terms of "bums on seats" and sheer numbers of people, the Biennale of Sydney 2000 at a conservative count had some 220,000 visitors. That makes the Biennale of Sydney 2000 probably one of the most successful international art exhibitions held in Australia.

From the 1960s onwards the "blockbuster" became a major part of the museum calendar. In the development of this form of exhibition museum organisations and curators become more like commercial entrepreneurs. They are entrepreneurs who aim to capture an audience whose leisure activities are becoming more privatised through TV, more dispersed through the rise of technology. Back in the late nineteenth century, for example, there was not the devoted audience for cinema, there were not any bowling alleys, there were not any major sporting activities that captured large audiences. Some people find this pandering to the general public, to advertising as distasteful, at odds with the air of elitism that is often is meant to surround art and culture. Advertising is far too low an activity compared to the eternal values that are meant to reside in art.

The entrepreneurial spirit for contemporary artists has been part and parcel of the occupation since the 1790's. Artists as diverse as Frederick Church, Hiram Powers, Jacques Louis David and Gustave Courbet asked the general public to pay admission to view their works. In more recent times a good example of this type activity is the art of Christo who to complete his works becomes not only an entrepreneur but also a team manager, a negotiator across a broad range of institutional fronts. For example, *The Wrapped Reichstag* began in Christo's mind in 1970. Negotiations began in 1971 however the work did not come to fruition until 1995. The German government paid for this particular spectacle.

Contemporary art demands an activated viewer. In general formal terms, contemporary art revolves around the experiences of sensory overload and sensory depravation. Or, put another way, contemporary art is about the exploration of the qualities of absence and accumulation. Obviously, contemporary art is also about a range of other sensations and other associations as well. Occasionally there are politically motivated contents and activities. There are also culturally specific issues and understandings that emerge in contemporary art .

To enhance the art experience, most contemporary art galleries have adopted a minimal white environment. The "white cube" is a relatively new phenomenon in the art world. Whiteness only becomes standard museum practice around the late 1940's. Betty Parsons a New York gallerist is often credited for beginning this trend. She thought that grey, burgundy or green-flocked wallpaper with tassels and heavy velvet curtains was not a sympathetic background for the works of Barnett, Newman or Pollock. Whiteness creates a pristine and hygienic environment. Some people say this choice of background colour makes the museum become like a hospital or a health camp, or even a prison. Perhaps all of these descriptions are appropriate at certain times to certain exhibitions. The hygiene of whiteness is designed to help the viewer to focus more on the objects that are within their gaze. However sometimes this whiteness is so hygienic that the viewer is made to feel dirty themselves or that the viewer is somehow defiling this space. Perhaps this is because many newly designed purpose built museums are more to do with the architects and designers tastes than the main purpose of a gallery which is to display art. Sometimes, the architecture can overwhelm the art that they are meant to display. Indeed the new Frank Gehry designed museum in Bilbao has been roundly criticised for being more about Frank Gehry than about the true function of the building. Some of you might have been to the National Gallery in Canberra and have also had a similar view, "it's a nice building but it's not very good for art"…. On a more positive note, new technologies are being incorporated more and more into the exhibition programs and infrastructures of contemporary art museums. In 2001, the Art Gallery of New South Wales is presenting an exciting exhibition called *Space Odysseys.* Curated by Victoria Lynn this exhibition is designed specifically to foreground new media technologies and their close link to art. The work of Joyce Hinterding, James Turrell and Gary Hill will be featured.

So the contemporary gallery can provide a series of unique and sometimes unusual environments or terrains. In many ways, the viewer or the audience is an initiate, on an intimate, sometimes exotic, sometimes, frightening journey..

So what is it when we go to an art gallery? What do we want from the art gallery experience? There is a vestige of ritual when we enter the gallery space. We seem to desire an art that can refresh, transform and regenerate. A number of contemporary artists play with these notions. For example *Shoes for Departure c.1992* by Marina Abramovich are a pair of quartz stone clogs initially displayed for the viewer to try on. In this work Abramovich draws on a heritage of fantasy of magic and alchemy. Alchemy is a system of knowledge that pre dates modern science. Its main emphasis was the processes of organic transformation. In this light *Shoes for Departure* are not only "made for walking", they're made for space travel, and they're made for travel in our imagination. These shoes can actually take us places. There is a curative element to this piece.

To view any artwork, to view any object in the world, we have to establish and create boundaries. A lot of contemporary art challenges the constructions and maintenance of these boundaries. In the 1960s and 70s, museums embraced what was then a new art form called performance art. Much performance art is concerned with the limits of the body, the social, the physical, the political and the psychosexual are all referenced. The championing of what

are sometimes considered radical art forms underlines again the contentious role of the museum as a site and symbol of cultural values.

The shadow of Marcel Duchamp looms large in the experience of the contemporary art museum environment. Duchamp could be argued to be engaged in an oppositional aesthetic to traditional art. However objects such as *In Advance of a Broken Arm* and *Fountain* challenge but also liberate what art can be. The snow shovel and the urinal are simple manufactured objects that have been taken away from their function, their original location and then given a new status, a new aura by their placement within the gallery environment.

One of the great things that museums do is make us think about the nature of objects, why objects are held, why objects are collected. We all collect things, we all have our special drawer of special things tucked away somewhere. We often don't know why we collect objects. Quite often, the very act of survival, the fact that these objects have been kept by us (and other people) over time gives another aura to the objects. Objects can engender an air of exquisite nostalgia. Artists as diverse as Allan McCollum, Wolfgang Laib, Annette Messager, Christian Boltanski, Narelle Jubelin and John Woolsley draw on these qualities and associations for there work Nostalgia is a very important element in modern and post-modern culture. Sometimes collecting can have obsessive, possibly frightening series of references.

The pristine and hygenic air of museums has prompted an important strategy for contemporary artists. This strategy is called displacement. This refers to displacement of materials not necessarily associated with the museum environment such as rubbish, dirt and stone. Meg Webster, Jannis Kournelis, Ken Unsworth and Michael Goldberg make works that have a power just by the accumulation of unfamiliar materials. They are familiar in other contexts but not necessarily to us in the museum environment. In Michael Goldberg's installation *The Well Built Australian* 1999 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales the artist brought a building site into the gallery space. In amongst the industrial fencing and cement formworks were maps and artworks that referred to a time when Sydney was a location not dominated by human interventions.

Within the art world there are certain fashions that can emerge by courtesy of the museum environment. The employment of unusual or atypical methods of display and lighting, the continued use of various scales of vitrina, coloured walls, decaying natural substances and so on are all designed to activate the viewer. With a majority of conceptual based art the audience is expected to engage with not only the obvious content of the work but also the scale, the sequence, the proportion and the framing. Artists are now highly attuned to the qualities of spatiality, that is, the physical and psychological effects of space.

The museum is still a space, which can engender extreme emotions and responses. For example works displayed in the Biennale of Sydney 2000 by Gillian Wearing, Fiona Hall, Adriana Varejao, Sanngawa and Marlene Dumas dealt honestly with sexuality, religion and domestic violence. Contemporary Australian artists such as Adam Cullen, Mikala Dwyer, Racquel Ormela and Stephen Birch often work in a deliberately false, naïve, oppositional mode. Such revelation is difficult for some members of the audience. So in the display of works the museum can also engage with issues of censorship, the law morality and ethics. After all, by tradition, the museum is meant to be the keeper of culture and the objects or forms that are contained in the museum are meant to be an essence of that particular culture. However in these times there is a recognition that perhaps art operates now as a form of philosophical discourse, and that the museum as the House of Art, can play a catalytic role in the development of public consciousness by displaying such 'difficult" artworks

If then contemporary art is a form of philosophical discourse, what are some of the codes implicit in the display of contemporary art. These codes oscillate around artists, curators, and the audience. There are the formal codes that relate to the choices of technique, materials and composition. There are the codes of accumulation and absence. There are the codes that revolve around ideas associated with consumption, marketplace of art and desire. Another series of codes involve the spectators themselves. They or we have made a contractual arrangement to enter the museum space for an experience, an encounter with a

range objects and a range of spaces that have no clear function. By tradition, this encounter in the museum space is contemplative and perhaps even transformative. There are the vestiges of a quasi-religious ritual in the passage or journey through the gallery location. Another series of entwined coding is recognition of the organic relationships that exist in the art world itself. There are the personal and professional arrangements or relationships between the artist, the curator, the critic and the collector and the museum itself. The climactic resting place of all art practice is still the official museum. The museum space provides a venue or terrain where those authorities of tradition, of history, of location, of maker, of collection, display, spectacle, naming, talking and writing come into high relief.

Craig Judd is lecturer in Theories and Histories of Art Practice at Sydney College of the Arts and Education Manager for Biennale of Sydney.