ART EDUCATION AND CURATING[1]

Peter Stupples

In Dunedin, New Zealand, as well as in every city and town pretending to cultural significance in the Western world, local citizens and visitors have the opportunity to see a range of art exhibitions in galleries and sites of great diversity – in public and dealer galleries, in community galleries and museums, and in exhibitions on the precincts of universities and art schools. In New Zealand the very fabric of every *whare whakairo* (meeting house), amongst other things, is also both a public and very private exhibition of art. In Dunedin, as elsewhere, there are also many rich and diverse collections of art in peoples' homes, in a city that possesses, collectively, a great range of visual treasures.

The experience of looking, of giving attention to artworks, will be different for all of us. As art educators we need to keep in mind that this is equally true for each of our students and pupils. We bring to that experience of looking, each one of us, the particular baggage of our specific cultural knowledge, our particular upbringing, our unique experience of life – including that of the visual culture of our own community, the educational institutions of our childhood and adulthood, the tastes and prejudices of our family and peers. Cumulatively these experiences will leave a residue in our minds and bodies, that misleading traditional binary description of our single functioning corporeal selves. Most of us, to a greater or lesser degree, have been educated in the appreciation, evaluation and history of the visual culture of our heritage, of the usefulness and effectiveness of that heritage in our experience of the world, which will include, of course, being entertained by the visual, horrified by the visual, mystified by the visual, charmed and seduced by the visual, disconcerted and traumatised by the visual, uplifted and healed by the emollient of the visual. All this because visual experience is there for most of us from waking to sleeping, and even then present in the fantasies of our dreaming and the violating visions of our nightmares.

What we more narrowly mean by art education is some channelling of this experience into the creation of visual marks or models along the lines of the educational theory sanctioned by the culture of our local institutions. This may not always be spelled out, but nevertheless tacitly understood, established by the practice of teachers' college, the school room, the lecture theatre, the culture of the studio. In every case there will be encasing conventions, sanctioning institutions, collective coercion, an agreed wisdom, framing histories, embalming language, the inertia of cultural habit. These habits are not only inescapable, but necessary adjuncts to our sense of identity, of our experience of being-in-the-world, of social survival and nurture.

As art educators we can make ourselves aware of the nature of those supports and conventions. We can both make use of them and, at times, find them not only irksome but even, on occasion, positively harmful, particularly to the free experience of the visual world of Others. As educators we both help to maintain their comforting structures and find that comfort cloying. We, and those we teach (if that is the right word) both want to nurse our/their fragile ego/s and to give way to our/their aggressive desires. We, and they, feel the contending desires of the need to adhere to rules that help us belong to a community and the violent rage of the iconoclast.

In our postmodern world we try to acknowledge our tendencies to waywardness as well as the support and blinkered vision the conventions of our cultural history give us. These days, art galleries are as likely to present the abject, the anti-convention, as well as the visual balms of both belonging and the quest for transcendence.

I want to emphasise the greater visual culture we all inhabit to give a context for the role of art galleries in that mix, a role that is both sometimes overvalued by those who regularly visit art shows and are caught up in local artworlds, and underestimated by those who couldn't give a damn and whose visual culture is confined to the images that flicker across the screen of their television, computer or i-phone.

Visiting the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, one of the four great galleries in New Zealand, it is tempting to be seduced into giving it star billing in the visual heritage of Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet we must recognise that the majority of New Zealanders do not visit art galleries, and if they have ever been to one, it is likely to have been in the context of their school education, a bus trip, a day out of the classroom, a chance to talk to friends, to feel the hush of a space sanctified in the minds of some, but so unfamiliar to the experience of others that they feel the swelling violence of confronting the unfamiliar, the alien, the territory of the dominators, shamed, perhaps, by their ignorance of the Other. We need to be aware of the nature of this institution in our land – to see how it might delight some and alienate others. As educators we need to give space in our own minds to the extended field of feelings of those we educate.

Education is of course coercion, showing the way sanctified by society, building the frame, preserving the flame, gathering into the collective, substantiating cultural identity. This has always been the way of all societies, and all have used the visual to those ends. Through elaborate systems of filtration we appoint our guardians of the flame – the art gallery directors and administrators, the acquisitions committees and collection registrars, the artwriters – critics, historians, journal editors. These keepers display the stories within the frame, the stories of our artworlds, their beginnings, their relationship to our histories, the way they have been selected and gathered, preserved and exhibited, the way we have been consistently culturally coerced, the way the propaganda machine of our cultural identity has been constructed and nurtured.

Before the late eighteenth century the gallery was a privileged space, containing the objects of a private collection – even if they were the King's Pictures and, in a sense, a national asset. The shift of some galleries and museums, *kunstkamera*, houses of curiosities, from private to public, was accelerated during Napoleon's conquests in Europe, when the artworks of royal houses and dispossessed monasteries were handed over to new state authorities. At the same time, as a result of the Enlightenment, there was a growing sense of the ethnic nation-state, of pride in national language and literature, in national traditions of art and architecture, in their unique spiritual heritage, in the treasures gathered in the past by powerful political leaders and perspicacious collectors. The great unwashed were now re-seen as "the folk," the people of one language and set of traditions. Museums and galleries displaying "national" treasures helped to bind rich and poor, the powerful and the as yet disenfranchised, into a new political cohesion. In addition the masses were being educated in literacy and numeracy, the better to enable them to engage in the complex tasks of rapidly developing industry concentrated in large conurbations and to serve in the ever-expanding bureaucracy. Becoming "educated" broadens the range of possible curiosities, leading to an ever-increasing appetite for information and knowledge. Museums and galleries helped both to satisfy that hunger and to feed a desire for more.

These broad sentiments encouraged the development of institutions in Dunedin. European settlers wanted to preserve the cultural heritage they carried with them, including its artistic traditions. Most of the earliest artists of European origin were itinerants, spending time in the South Seas, Australia and New Zealand, leaving behind them as they passed through examples of their work based upon their training in Britain, France, Holland, Italy. It was natural for the early settlers to cherish these links with their cultural past, to collect and preserve them, not only as reminders of what they had left behind but also as examples of good practice, for emulation by home-grown New Zealand European artists.

Thus the development of art galleries always had a multiple agenda – to preserve heritage, but also to display exemplars of best practice, to show the first fruits of our own artistic endeavours. In the Dunedin Public Art Gallery scenes of Scotland by James Crowe Richmond were shown alongside landscapes in South Canterbury by William

Mathew Hodgkins, both being upheld as examples to which younger artists should aspire, thus maintaining the heritage transplanted from Europe.

The public gallery in Dunedin too became an institution, a building at the cultural heart of both province and nation, reinforcing pride in achievement, pride in a unique history, pride of possessions, a sense of cultural belonging. Whilst, we may add, the art of Māori was confined to the ethnographic cabinets of the Otago Museum, considered by the European founding fathers not as art but samples of the material culture of an Other.

In the late twentieth century that cultural belonging has been reassessed, sifted, found wanting, unbalanced, more difficult unequivocally to quantify and justify, as the notion of the ethnic nation-state has to contend with an increasing comprehension of social diversity and the contesting claims of a bicultural constitution in a multicultural society.

Public collections in New Zealand were made by the delegates of city fathers (mothers were never consulted). Until the mid-twentieth century the public galleries were small enough for most of any collection to be on display on a more or less permanent basis. The title of "curator" was often a synonym for "director," "keeper" – the "keeper of the flame." Only gradually was the permanent collection occasionally displaced by visiting shows or by selections from among the permanent to highlight the work of an individual or group, to emphasise a theme.

When there was an unalloyed sense of right by a culture's dominant group that their idea of art was indeed the uncontested *fact* of art to be shared and celebrated by all, to ensure the health of heritage – like some cultural cough linctus – to stiffen the sinews and summon the blood of cultural righteousness, then the permanent collection was not simply the only art that was needed, but the emphasis on permanence was itself a virtue, demonstrating that what was right and proper for all to see was settled, done and dusted, and that it would be so for ever and ever amen. There are still some in our society who rue the day when these clear virtues were undermined by the rise of the culture industry, by market forces and doubts in the sanctity of heritage.

Exhibitions are also shows. We employ that word from time to time as a more informal way of talking about such events, but there is a subtle difference in our use of these words. When you exhibit, you demonstrate a set of propositions, a string of facts, a well-documented history, the foundations of which are agreed by the keepers of the flame. A show, on the other hand, is a spectacle, a showing off, a declaration of artistic inventiveness, creativity. To put on a show you need a ringmaster, a master of ceremonies, someone to put it together, even, in a sense, to take responsibility for it. The director, the keeper of the flame, preoccupied with managing the permanent, needs someone to come and run a show that is distinctly temporary, in some way topical, particularly purposive, to emphasise some aspect of visual culture that it is determined should, for one reason or another, be displayed, dislodging some of the permanent to make room for the passing. Enter the guest curator.

I have curated three shows for the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. I would like to share some of my thoughts as I played ringmaster.

The first show, entitled "Sites for the Eyes: European Landscapes in the Permanent Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery" (November 2004–July 2005), had a distinct reason to be. By the early years of this twenty-first century the space given over to the permanent collection had shrunk to a single "gallery," or more lately, two such spaces, enabling only what has become known as "The Cream" to be displayed from a vast stock of images that otherwise may be rarely seen.

As a former member of the acquisitions committee of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery I was obliged to be familiar with what was on the racks or in the drawers, in storage. It was also true that the permanent collection had, for many visitors, become overfamiliar, until, like wallpaper, it was scarcely any longer seen. Here was an opportunity to do a number of things – to refresh the familiar by putting some of the cream alongside the hoi polloi, get rid of the chronological hang and encourage visitors to make new junctions between images – colour, form, size,

treatment, texture, stories – to make the visitor work to find meaning for themselves, to gently dislodge some of the conventions. Of course the curator was still the ringmaster, hoping to make the audience gasp at his audacity, his wit and cleverness, his eye for quirky neighbourliness, for a good story.

As I was preparing "Sites for the Eyes" my excursions through the rich material in storage revealed to my eye a number of other exhibitions waiting to be hung.

I was able to convince the Gallery that we could put together a second show around the themes of "War and Peace" (April–July 2007),[2] a nice contrast of opposites – the title of a famous novel and of a perennial topic that has been with human beings since before we sheltered in caves to find some peace from the war of the world of nature. It was interesting that Tolstoy should put "war" before "peace" as I found more images of violence than the calm enjoyment of unalloyed pleasure, but in one corridor it became possible to play off one wall of peaceful idylls against another of brazen bloodlust.

In mining the collection I came across a whole series of incredible watercolours by William Reed, who served in the Pacific in the New Zealand Field Ambulance Corps (1942-45), images that covered the whole spectrum, from death in battle to young men enjoying their bodies bathing in tropic lagoons – bathing in water being one of the key images in fantasies of peace and civilised contentment.

In both these exhibitions, as guest curator, I was given full freedom of the gallery collection to make any show I chose with the full co-operation of a dedicated team of gallery staff. The curator may select to tell a story, to coerce, to educate, but without the support of a gallery team to render advice, point out what might and what might not work, frame the unframed, shift the heavy sculpture, paint the walls, create the signage, keep track of the movement of works, care for security, organise the publicity, no show would get on the road.

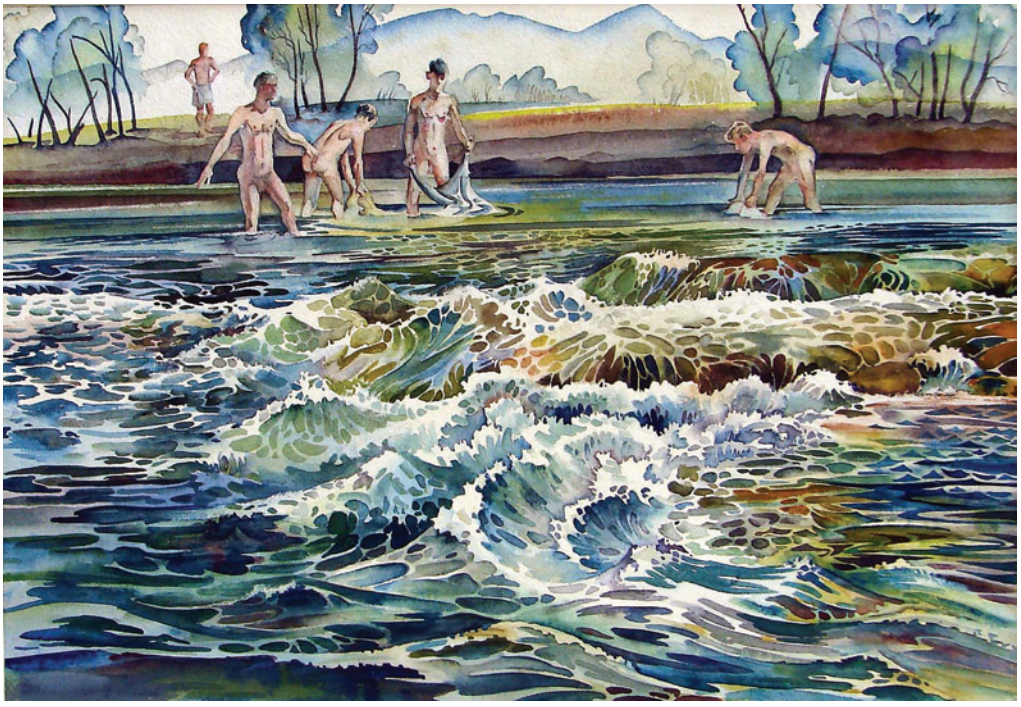

Figure 1: William Reed, *Washing Clothes, New Caledonia*, c. 1942-3, watercolour on paper, 29.7 x 39.5 cm. Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (206-1969). Gifted 1969 by Mr J Keith Skinner.

And of course there were unspoken contracts. I had to make a case, come up with lists of works, show where they could be hung, write drafts of signage. At any stage the keepers of the flame could bring down the curtain, tell the ringmaster to find another avenue for the demonstration of his talents. Both shows were conservative, making positive noises, showing off the collection to advantage, demonstrating the riches of the local, the accidents of acquisition, making a virtue of necessity, costing next to nothing by comparison with a show from Auckland or overseas. Both shows were used by the education officer at the gallery and visited by school children – when they were, consciously or not, persuaded of the picturesque quality of European landscapes, learned geography of the places from which their forebears had come, landscapes that were part of the DNA of every child. Or they were enabled to see images of Gallipoli, of the war in the Pacific, learning history to add to the geography, and also enabled to make their own comparisons between the desultory images of those cast down by violence and the rosy glow of bathing children or young men and women.

Both were also thematic shows, going against the grain of traditional curatorship, despite their conservatism. They did not explain the chronological history of Western art, they did not deal with the work of a single artist from early sketches to canvases of semi-divine maturity, they did not tell the story of New Zealand Western art: the logic of their structure was seemingly anarchic, at the whim of the curator, disturbing the firm grids of heritage, despite their seeming innocuousness.

But the images we show have many stories to tell. The logic of any story is itself a story to be told.

The third show (June–September 2009) was born of mixed parentage. On visits to Moscow and St Petersburg a colleague teaching design at Unitec, Auckland, made close contact with a group of contemporary Russian artists, two of whom visited Auckland for the festival in March 2009. Others sent work to New Zealand to be shown later in the year. The creators of some of these works featured in *Landfall 213* in 2007.

I have had a long association with the history of Russian art, which I taught for some years at the University of Otago. I suggested that this show, "I Was Russia," might be an opportunity to look at the Russian art that has been collected in New Zealand – to see the quirks of collecting, the stories behind them – and the gaps in our experience of Russian art's rich heritage. I began to construct a parallel show to be seen alongside "I Was Russia," to be called "Russian Art in New Zealand."

Art galleries are the repositories of accidents of fate, chance encounters, the manias and whims of collectors. Te Papa in Wellington has a group of paintings by Natalia Goncharova, who was a leading member of the Russian historical avant-garde in the years before the 1917 revolution. When that revolution took place Goncharova was with Diaghilev in Western Europe designing sets for the Ballets Russes. She decided not to return home but made a life for herself in Paris. Without her base within a functioning avant-garde and outside the country of her birth, she was gradually cast from the loop of any artworld. Mary Chamot, an assistant keeper at the Tate in London for ten years from 1965, became the London adviser and buyer for what was then called the National Art Gallery in Wellington. She had got to know Goncharova in Paris, about whom she wrote a book. By this time Goncharova was elderly, impoverished and ill. To help her financially Chamot arranged for a number of galleries to buy some of her work from her Paris collection. Some of these works formed part of my show in Dunedin, part of a group of early-twentieth-century Russian works enhanced by prints and sculpture from Auckland and Christchurch.

In 1969 the Russian artist and printmaker Yuri Podlyaski visited New Zealand as part of a Soviet goodwill mission. At the time his official visit would have been seen as part of Soviet soft sell, an aspect of Cold Water propaganda politics. Podlyaski brought with him a set of lithographs, linocuts and etchings by a raft of contemporary Russian artists, some of whom had considerable reputations in the Soviet Union. Possibly because no one else wanted them, the set of 19 prints ended up at the DPAG. Only one of them had been shown subsequently on the gallery walls. Now, 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, this group of prints has become representative of an era, of a style of Russian domestic art. It is unique in Australasia.

Dunedin has two unique private collections of Russian art that were brought together for the show.

The DPAG has five Russian icons – one of which is of superb quality. A private collector has more than 20 icons, ranging from the seventeenth century to the late nineteenth, covering a range of styles and religious affiliations within Orthodoxy. There is no other collection like it in Australasia, and it relates to aspects of the religious images of Goncharova. A second collector has inherited Russian ceramics and metalware from the immediate pre-Revolutionary decade, collected from an impoverished Russia in the 1920s.

A recent New Zealand ambassador in Moscow was also a collector of Russian contemporary art, but from the beginning of the twenty-first century. The pride of this collection is a group of paintings by Elena Cherkasova illustrating aspects of the Christian Nativity, modern icons, almost like frescoes from some hermitage in the wilderness of the Holy Land.

These four accidents – and others – I was able to mould into a single exhibition representing key aspects of Russia's visual heritage, using one section to point up aspects of another, telling a story to bring the culture of another space and other times into sharp focus for the edification and delight of a wide audience.

Art education – including curating – is work. The products of that work are enlightenment, seeing the world in a new way through the visual creativity of others, but also, at least to some extent, a keeping of the frame and the flame. The commodity produced is education, both that same enlightenment and, inescapably, coercion. In the best of all possible experiences it is also a dialogue, the use of the visual to engage in discussion, to question the frame and the flame, to see the visual less as evidence but rather as material for exploration and explanation, of

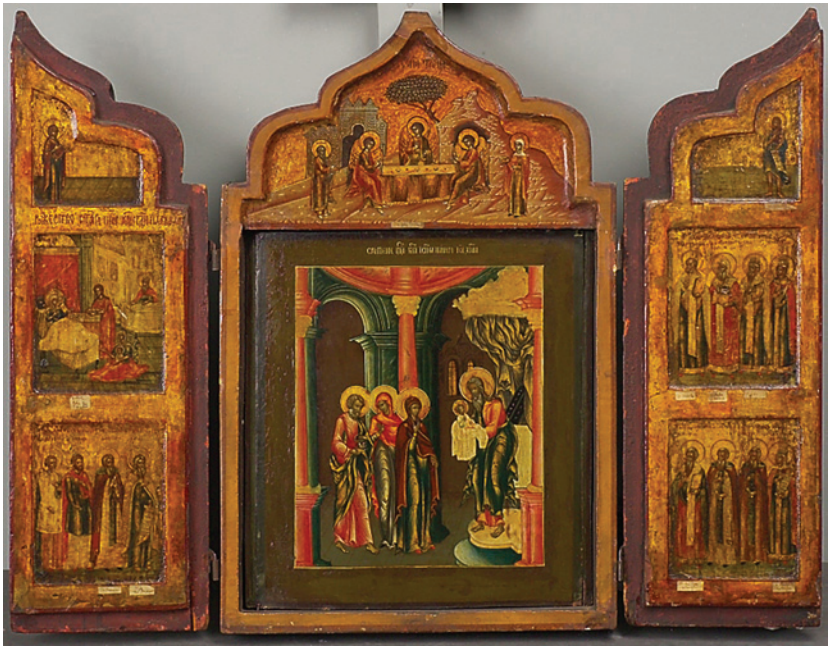

Figure 2: Russian Icon. *Presentation of the Holy Child in the Temple*, triptych, wings and top late 18th C., central panel later 19th C., tempera on gesso on limewood, left wing 49.9 x 16.1 cm, centre 50 x 32 cm, right wing 49.6 x 15.9 cm. Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery (4.1932).

discovering through such a novel confrontation a little more about who or what we are, and maybe want to be. The curator, as well as educator, can be the catalyst for such positive experiences, not stating what is and should be, but suggesting possibilities, starting conversations about the future. The result of such verbal exchange about the visual can lead to an extension of mind, a respect and tolerance for the experience of others, to the enrichment of lives. Curating is unashamedly educational. Educating is allowing dialogues to flow around information, attitudes, cultural and social positions, giving elbow room to our place in the world and, in particular, to the place, and visual culture, of others.

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He has written widely about Russian visual culture and the social history of art. Among the six books he has published is *Pavel Kuznetsov: His Life and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Recent journal articles include "Visual Culture, Synthetic Memory and the Construction of National Identity," *Third Text*, 17:2 (2003), 127-39; "On Hanging 'War and Peace'," *Scope: Art 1* (November 2006), 43-9; six entries in the *Beloved: Dunedin Public Art Gallery Guide*, December 2009; "Visual Voices: Heeding the Specificity of the Cultural Context of Art," *Junctures*, 9 (2007), 1-10; "Suprematism in the Antipodes: Malevich in New Zealand," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 41 (2007), 19-35; "Malevich and Vorticism," *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, 4 (Winter 2008); "Ground," *Scope, Art 3* (November 2008), 149-57; and "The Vestimentary and Identity: British Pop Art," *Context*, 18 (May 2009), 5-10.

Stupples has also curated three art exhibitions at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery: "Sites for the Eyes: European Landscape in the Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery" (November 2004–July 2005), "War and Peace" (April 2006–July 2007), and "RAINZ: Russian Art in New Zealand" (June–September 2009).

1 A version of this paper was presented at the conclusion of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Art Educators Conference in Dunedin, New Zealand, on 23 April 2009.

2 Peter Stupples, "On Hanging 'War and Peace'," *Scope: Art 1* (November 2006), 43-9.