



Illuminating life: Tony Ellwood in conversation with Anna Waldmann

THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA is Australia's oldest public art gallery. It opened on 24 May 1861, Queen Victoria's birthday. As the inaugural curator and master of the School of Painting, Eugene von Guérard was the gallery's first director. Fifteen directors later, Tony Ellwood, former National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) deputy director and Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) director, took the helm of the much-loved institution with the mission, as stated on the website, 'to illuminate life by collecting, conserving and presenting great art'.

Anna Waldmann: You have been working in the arts since the early 1990s when you were director of Waringarri Aboriginal Arts cooperative in Western Australia. What are the major changes you've witnessed in the arts in the past twenty years?

Tony Ellwood: Over that time the arts have certainly changed dramatically as galleries have grown in ambition, scale and the pace at which they operate. One fundamental change is related to the internet: we are now connected to other professionals and artists in ways that would have been inconceivable a few decades ago. Museums exist now both as physical and virtual spaces.

AW: *The Art Newspaper* ranked the NGV as the twenty-fifth most visited gallery in the world. You have been quoted as saying 'I want it [NGV] to be fresh and welcoming as soon as you enter'. Is it the number of visitors or their experience that interests you most and what would you like to change?

TE: Any museum director who says he is not concerned about numbers is lying! Numbers equate to financial stability but they also provide a clear sense of how people feel about us. However, numbers are only one measure of success and, once visitors are through the doors, the quality of the experience is paramount. We want people to know that they are in a special space. One small but important move will be to make the foyer areas more interesting. From November 2012, for instance, we have exhibited the work of two contemporary Indonesian artists [Jompet Kuswidananto and Eko Nugroho] at

National Gallery of Victoria International (NGVI). It is projects like this, which are unexpected and contemporary, that help animate the gallery.

AW: It has become a cliché to say that museums are today's churches – special places for contemplation. Conversely, there's a strong opinion that museums should aim to be part of normal life. Which side of the argument are you on?

TE: I don't see the two aspects as necessarily separate. I certainly want the gallery to be a place that is 'normalised' for people, which allows them to feel that they can claim the space as their own. But, equally, when art museums work well, they offer that rarest of things in our contemporary society – the space and time for contemplation. This isn't always passive; people should be able to simply enjoy themselves here and feel energised. But the museum lets people connect with art and, through that experience, awaken something creative in themselves too.

AW: The NGV has a spectacular historical encyclopedic collection. What are your plans to develop it and to add a new emphasis on contemporary art?

TE: The heart of this gallery is its collection and I will actively encourage a full range of exhibitions, research and programs that highlight its encyclopedic nature. It is true that I believe we need to focus more on contemporary art but that will never be to the detriment of other historical artforms. We are actively working to display the permanent collections galleries in different ways. In 2012 the top floor of the NGVI gallery was given over to contemporary art, allowing us the chance to highlight new acquisitions and recent gifts. I am also keen to expand the Pacific Galleries and to start commissioning artists to create works for this space.

AW: You are hoping for a new wing adjacent to one of the existing buildings. At the same time, the NGV incurred an operating deficit of \$2.2 million in 2010–11. It's not a good position to be in when you are planning extensions. How are you meeting this challenge?

TE: We aim to be a break-even organisation, but the gallery, like

every other business, has been hit by the Global Financial Crisis. We have a very prudent and well-interrogated financial system in place but times are certainly tough. It is not the position I want to be in but my hope is that by making the NGV a more desirable and welcoming place we will start to turn this around.

AW: There are unrealistic requirements from boards that museum directors be scholars, fundraisers, financial and public-relations experts, and building supervisors. What is your forte?

TE: The demands on museum directors are certainly higher than they ever have been. While it is probably up to others to judge what my forte is, I can say that I take great pleasure in working with both the internal culture of organisations and how we relate to our audiences. I relish the challenge of making this great organisation even greater and more creative for those who work in it and visit it.

AW: Over the past 150 years, the exceptional generosity that started with Alfred Felton had a major impact on the NGV collection. Many of the 70,000 works in the NGV collection have been acquired through private philanthropy. However, in recent years, private collectors and private art museums have become a competitive part of the cultural ecology. Do you see them as rivals?

TE: Absolutely not. We occupy quite different places in the cultural landscape. No-one could deny that the Museum of Old and New Art [Hobart] and White Rabbit [Sydney], among other venues, have added something remarkable to cultural life in Australia and I applaud them for it. With regard to private collectors, as you note, we have been the beneficiary of some extraordinary generosity. Many of our patrons remain active private collectors and I am delighted to say that, on occasion, they donate to this and other galleries.

AW: In 2004 the NGV began a series titled Melbourne Winter Masterpieces. What exhibitions are you planning for the future?

TE: We have many great exhibitions planned. Along with the Melbourne Winter Masterpieces we are scheduling contemporary art and design exhibitions in the summer months. In 2012, for

instance, we inaugurated NGV Summer with 'Radiance: The Neo-Impressionists' and major contemporary shows by Thomas Demand and Jeff Wall, two of the world's leading photographers. Add the Indonesian artists Nugroho and Kuswidananto into the mix, along with artist Jon Campbell in the NGV Kids Space, and you have some engaging programming. This year we are very excited by the prospect of 'Melbourne Now' at National Gallery of Victoria Australia (NGVA), which will encompass the best of Melbourne's artists and designers.

AW: More than ever new technologies have become part of the museum experience. Australian public art galleries have not been very adventurous in that respect. Do you see this changing and how?

TE: It is one of my intentions to fully embrace new technologies here. My experience at QAG showed me how ready people are to do this. I think we can offer a much more layered viewing experience for people through the use of technologies, which allow us to add interviews, extended texts and other interpretative material that gives density to the viewing experience.

AW: Which museum directors have influenced and inspired you?

TE: I began my career with James Mollison and his vision and passion for art had a formative impact on me. James encouraged and mentored young staff and I have never forgotten how it felt to have that support early in my career. I hope to be able to give back some of that support now.

Radiance: The Neo-Impressionists, National Gallery of Victoria International, Melbourne, 16 November 2012 – 17 March 2013; **Jeff Wall Photographs**, National Gallery of Victoria Australia, Melbourne, 30 November 2012 – 17 March 2013; **Thomas Demand**, NGVI, 30 November 2012 – 17 March 2013; **Jon Campbell: Just Sing What You Feel**, NGVA, 8 December 2012 – 17 February 2013.

