

UNESCO Memory of the world panel presentation – ‘Imagine a world without memories’

Memory is the touchstone of cultural institutions and the essence of my job as an archivist. The personal papers, visual arts ephemera and interviews held in the Research Library at the National Gallery of Australia allow researchers to be drawn into a conversation with the visual arts and travel through time to learn the story behind a painting or sculpture or textile in the Gallery’s collection . This is not just through viewing the art work in the public space itself but engaging with notes and letters, photographs, scribbled handwriting on the back of an envelope and voices exchanging ideas. All these things can help open up the past and tell a story about the life of a person involved in or creating art.

Personal papers document individual lives and personalities. Sometimes, they seem to me to contain traces of the personality of the author – just like the tangible, physical presence of letters and diaries can seem to carry the weight of memory. They carry with them the place they have come from, the distances they have traveled, the time that has passed. What kind of human experiences are captured in these documents? What was the artist’s world like at the time? Who and what inspired them to create works of art, and in whom did they confide? These things are not easily discovered and sometimes do not enter into the formal record of galleries and other cultural institutions.

The letters and diaries of artists can provide a detailed source of commentary on personal life, relationships and creativity. They can include the artist’s opinions, prejudices and emotional reactions concerning teaching, putting together exhibitions and the whole experience of creating, whether it is a painting, sculpture, design or textile. Of course, sometimes there is a problem that the conversation can be one-sided and gaps and silences in the memory emerge. For example, the majority of the letters in former gallery director James Mollison’s private papers were those he received, not the ones he sent. Only one voice can be heard.

Memories of artistic creativity are shared in a series of interview done by James Gleeson in the late 1970s when he interviewed nearly 100 Australian artists about works acquired for the National Gallery’s Australian art collection. The interviews were requested by then director, James Mollison to gather more information for the catalogue. They were not formal interviews intended for a wider public audience but more I suppose of a conversation between two artists. The power of these memories is two-fold. One is the personal recollection of the artist on how the work was made. The other ties into the National Gallery’s corporate and official memories – the history of its collection acquisition, whose work they acquired for the national collection and the history of that work itself.

The power and intimacy of the spoken word as opposed the written one is something I often think about particularly as I listen to some of these interviews.

The work that I have done mainly involves the written word, the text, the document. Oral history is quite different. Hearing the artist's voice provides an immediacy of experience that can be lacking from written documentation, even the most frank and intimate written exchange.

In one interview James Gleeson asks the painter Brett Whitely about the 'symphonic' qualities of a particular painting purchased by the National Gallery. Brett Whitely responds:

'Yes, yes.... After a while I just started to feel the picture as almost being like music.. in the studio where I worked which was an old deserted barn, there were about 40 fruit bats that lived there and they had a particular sound. There was the droning of bees that were perpetually around; wasps and the whole creaking sound of summer, you know, in a sense that started to become the music of the picture'.

The use of musical metaphors to capture the visual process of painting is also used by Judy Cassab when describing to Gleeson how she captured a likeness in portraiture:

'I think that I could express it by saying that, catching the likeness or drawing the bone structure, or using paint, is almost like scales on a piano now. Because I'm much more interested in digging deeply into the character and as I get older I know more about the psychology of my sitter. But I'm still more intuitive and instinctive I think than conscious of what I'm doing'.

It is the ability to hear in Judy Cassab and Brett Whitley's voice, the reflection and then the excitement, which makes a recorded interview different from the written on – the use of the human voice itself as the primary source material. And this makes the memory truly live.

These letters, diaries, notes, photographs and interviews which I work with every day, can open up the memory of the past – ordinary and extraordinary, with gaps and silences – but together offering a multitude of narratives about art, words and life. It is why I am glad to live in a world where we do have memories and ones that I can help make accessible to an audience.

Thank you.

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