



Air to life:

20 years in the Australia-Asian arts atmosphere

ALISON CARROLL

I HAVE JUST STEPPED DOWN after 20 years initiating and then leading the Asialink arts program. My job was creating and running a program that enabled the Australian (and increasingly the Asian) arts community to engage more easily and effectively in the region, and that meant putting forward ideas that the powers-that-be liked enough to fund. We had no core funding, raising it all from whoever might think what we were trying to do was worthy of their support.

Artists keep doing their work, more immune from the daily nuance of which and who and how. But ultimately many are affected by whether such efforts are successful: the 600-plus Asialink Residents for example, the Indonesian interns, the curators and exhibiting artists in our exhibition touring program, the writers on tour, and so on. No other country in the world has a program like this, and even when some parts are similar, as the exhibition touring program is, say, to that of the Goethe-Institut, or the Japan Foundation, they don't have an opening every twenty-three days, as our recent figures have shown, nor do it for the tiny money of Asialink's program.¹

Why did I and the team around me do it? Because it was important, and rewarding; because, if we didn't, Australia and our arts community would be the poorer. We

did a lot, I think with much pride (and my successor Lesley Alway, and her team will carry on in new ways), but we could have done so much more.

In looking at the bigger issues in the ebb and flow of interest and focus on our cultural engagement with Asia in that period, what looms large is how the particular human environment (emotional as much as intellectual) has influenced people to think and act over this time, taking precedence over an objectively ordained and sustained course. All decisions of course are tempered by the moment and the people involved, but our arts decisions in Australia seem to be extremely affected by this. Compare Singapore, where the 'nation-state' gets together, thinks what is good for the whole, and does it, or so it seems to this outsider. When have we done that, and if so, have we sustained it over a long enough period to really make a difference? And why not? – because, I think, we remain uncomfortable with the arts being an inherent, important part of our society.

We continue to be controlled from above, despite the idea of democracy. So to start at the top, my twenty years in the Asian 'agenda' have witnessed just four prime ministers. Paul Keating changed the atmosphere of this agenda, pumping in ozone, personally wanted change, and, in the



P5: Sichuan Province, in a tent at Garthar Chode Monastery, established by the seventh Dalai Lama. (l to r) Sam Leach, Tony Lloyd, unknown (monk), Shi Jinsong, Cang Xin, unknown (monk). Photograph by Tony Lloyd. Under the Australia Culture in China 2010 project and facilitated by Darwin's 24HR Art, artists from Australia and China travelled together throughout Australia's Top End, China and Tibet, with a culminating exhibition in Beijing in November 2010.

P6:1/ Jeong-Hoo Lee, *ONE DAY TODAY*, installation detail, Artspace Studios, Sydney, 2010. Photograph by Jeong-Hoo Lee. Korean artist Jeong-Hoo is currently Asialink's artist in residence at Artspace, Sydney.

2/ Pauline Nguyen and Janet De Neeffe (right), at the 2010 Ubud Writers & Readers Festival, October 2010. Author and Ubud-based restaurateur De Neeffe is the founder of this Festival; Sydney-based Nguyen is author of *Secrets of the Red Lantern* drawing on Sydney's famed Red Lantern restaurant which she runs with Luke Nguyen and Mark Jensen. The Festival receives support from various government and private agencies in Australia, including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Gold Sponsor).

process, to change us. The Australia Council responded, making a target of all its international funding to be 50%, and Asialink's fledgling program was born from this, as well as from new funding support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). 'Arts and Asia' were in its heyday. They were good days for us and in retrospect made our program possible not only because of the funding, small as it was, but because the air was charged with the idea of Asia and possibility.

Did Keating bring along the wider constituency? Probably not. I was told that many of the staff at the Australia Council were resistant to the Asia agenda, and when John Howard came in, that 50% objective was quietly put away.

John Howard made a big point about being as Asia-focused as Keating, but somewhere the slip between rhetoric and reality got found out. People in Asia never forgot the 'too many Asians' comment of the late 1980s, and the reality of Mr Howard and Asia-and-the-arts never, to put it mildly, got much traction. Asialink Arts struggled for ten years to stay alive. The carpetbaggers of the Keating Asia agenda fell away, which was fine, but we started to join the Asian ghetto

of 'true believers' versus the rest, and I wrote, spoke and cajoled to no great success about keeping our eye on this particular ball. Peter Townsend, eminent first editor of *Art Monthly Australia*, an 'old China hand', asked me to write a monthly column on Asia for the magazine. That stopped, partly because its time was up and partly because 'Asia' was over towards the end of the Keating era. *Art Asia Pacific* was born in Sydney during Keating's term, and indeed I was asked to edit a first version, but it too died and re-emerged anew in New York. The *Asia Pacific Triennial* was born, sure of Queensland parentage but with federal godparents smiling benignly, during the Keating years. Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art led the way with internationally ground-breaking shows of Asian art during these years: *Zones of Love: contemporary art from Japan* (1991-92) and *Mao Goes Pop* (1993) stand out – and then, like so much, the Asia energy faded away.

I remain uncertain of long-term Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's position in this. I was told he was 'interested', and at the very end of his term he announced that DFAT in the 2007-08 Budget would include 'additional funding of \$20.4 million for cultural diplomacy over the next four years' – considerable money in arts terms. However it was too late. This annual \$5 million injection that Mr Downer apparently secured was a first 'return' to the Keating days. Alas, it lasted just six months, and was scrapped in the financial cutting of the Labor Party in the weeks prior to the election when Kevin Rudd came to power. The effect of this non-funding still remains.

Maybe under Mr Howard the arts were so poorly regarded that, even for Alexander Downer, it was just too hard a row to plough. Certainly during many exchanges I had with non-arts bureaucrats I was made to feel the 'mendicant' and without a role that was seen as worthy in the national agenda. There was a terrible story at the time, that only one member of the Howard cabinet had any professional arts background at all, and he asked for that to be kept quiet.

My work in Indonesia included meetings with AusAID, an area with reportedly substantial funding, pushing the idea that arts could be included in their bailiwick. I kept coming up against the idea that the arts 'were ballet and opera', outside the interests and sympathy of AusAID. For my sins, instead of saying that they gave air to life, I used the phrase that they were 'capacity building' – the social agenda of the arts in a poorer country. It seemed the only way to get any response, and even that was unsuccessful.

So, Kevin Rudd. He was Mr Asia, wasn't he? ... though he was never Mr Culture – and they need to collide in some sort of sympathy. We have been served with as difficult a hand here as with the previous regime. Asialink had had so much hope, and in the last period of my time there, certainly the education agenda was picked up by then Education Minister and Rudd's successor, Julia Gillard, but for the arts: nothing doing.

Which brings me to the next line down, the Arts Ministers. Asialink has never had close friends in this court. Liberal Ministers who stood out for me were Richard Alston, who had youthful backpacking stories in India, and Rod Kemp, who considered the Asia agenda but never took it on. I was disappointed with him when I asked for his help to encourage senior public servants to travel to Indonesia, to

really 'see' the richness of Indonesian culture. I was on the Board of the Australia Indonesia Institute at the time and hoped ministerial 'push' would galvanise this sector to go. He said he would help, but it didn't really happen. Peter Garrett, it seems, was also not convinced, indeed telling Utopia Director Natalie King and myself recently that Asia engagement was not as high a priority for him 'as income for artists'.² We pointed out they were not mutually exclusive. Now it is over to Simon Crean.

This is all SO personal, so much weighing on the feelings of a tiny group of people. Is this really how it should work? The key decision makers about strategy and funding take their lead from this group. It is no surprise that Australia Council focused on Europe in the early 2000s (I have written on this in *Art Monthly* in the past – down to some 10-18% of international funds), and the major institutions still struggle to see Asia as 'us' – to endure for 'political' reasons. There have been exceptions, and Queensland Art Gallery stands out here, as do Douglas Gautier's efforts at the Adelaide Festival Centre. Such efforts, by their nature, show the issue still is an absolute reality.

Arts tertiary education institutions also have not changed, again with a couple of exceptions, one being John Clark's work at the University of Sydney. I wonder if they perhaps also are going backwards from the gains that seemed to be made in the Keating years. The school curriculum is starting to force an Asia agenda, with quotas on the material to be taught. Notably, the change in focus at the Australia Council in the early 1990s was also quota-based – perhaps this is the only way to go, to force people to comply through the numbers.

Asialink ran a National Summit on the Asia Future in Canberra in May, with arts included amongst the veritable captains of industry, security, education, health and government. Everyone loved the arts people being there. (That is one of the interesting aspects of working in the arts – derided as superfluous and mendicant in the decision-making halls of power – but loved when met face to face.) And from this there is an agreement, which Lesley Alway is taking forward, to develop a strategy for arts engagement with Asia for our nation. Golly! Maybe at last we will get away from the personal, and really make something long-term happen to our credit and advantage.

The picture I paint is very broad-brush, and indeed, ironically in the context of my comments, a very personal account. I have talked about the national arena. One of our problems in Australia is Canberra itself: so far from the rest of us, so the decision-makers there do not know us, and we do not know them. I am often struck in Asian capitals, talking to colleagues, how they do know the people who make the decisions, usually on a strong social basis. There is none of this making-an-appointment-to-lobby a point, rather ongoing involvement in the discussion of the day.

In this scenario I should talk about the states, as

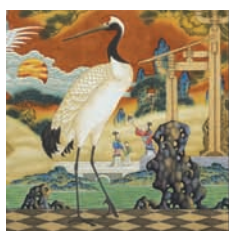
they do do such important work, depending again, however, on the interests of the key political figures. Jeff Kennett of sacred name in Victoria, Wayne Goss in Queensland – both key to developments there. Where is the Asia action? Those two states. WA did put up its hand for a while, but this has faded away in recent years. And to local government: at Asialink we gloried for a few years in an internationalist push from the City of Melbourne and that made a great difference to what was possible in that city. But that came and went on personal agendas of those in power.

I see in Asia major city governments coming to the party in the international agenda for the arts, and their cities bloom. Taipei, with its biennale, the main art museum in the country, and the International Artists' Village, all supported by the city. Tokyo now, with the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Photography and a number of others, all totally run by the city, as well as Tokyo Wonder Site, a paragon of an arts organisation thinking strategically and internationally. Singapore of course, with its cultural precinct, museums by the dozen, art schools, biennale, festivals; you name it, they are doing it (in a nation of three to four million people – amazing). True, the interest of these cities rise and fall in terms of their own political realities, but not so whimsically or unstrategically as we are used to.

I am writing this in England, taking some time away. I am struck by how parochial the news is here, including the BBC and *The Guardian*; that France is too far away. I am also struck by the gloom here about funding cuts, and know this is current also in Europe. It seems a most fantastic time for Australians to think positively about our place and role in the world, on the Asia Pacific side of the globe. The dreadful irony is that twenty years ago I used to say this with more confidence than I do today. 🌀

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1. *Every 23 Days: 20 years touring Asia* is the title of Asialink's recent publication which documents the 70-plus contemporary exhibitions managed by Asialink's Visual Arts Touring Exhibition Program. Available via: http://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/our_work/arts/publications/
 2. Utopia is an itinerant, visual arts project which involves a range of cultural activities and is held every two years in different Asia Pacific cities. The project is hosted by Asialink with a steering committee (comprising Yusaku Imamura, Director, Tokyo Wonder Site, Tan Boon Hui, Director, Singapore Art Museum, and Alison Carroll) under director Natalie King.
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Alison Carroll is an arts administrator, curator and writer. Her latest publication is *The Revolutionary Century: Art in Asia, 1900-2000*.



The White Crane, a painting by the Chinese artist Wang Meng, 14th century, courtesy of the National Gallery, London.

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