The Blockbuster’s ‘Alibi’: The Exhibition Catalogue and Legitimacy

Nothing denotes an exhibition’s blockbuster status more than its large and lavishly illustrated catalogue. But what is the catalogue’s purpose, and what role does it play in the blockbuster enterprise? The blockbuster catalogue is plagued by internal contradictions and competing values. On the one hand the catalogue can act as an ‘alibi’ for commercial and economic interests, by providing a scholarly or educational justification for these spectacular events. On the other hand, the catalogue is merchandise: a commemorative commodity highly conducive to the interests of marketing and sponsorship branding. This paper considers the catalogue’s symbolic value and its privileged status in the blockbuster exhibition. As the commodity with the greatest intellectual respectability, the catalogue stands above the paraphernalia of the exhibition shop.

In consumption generally, economic exchange value (money) is converted into sign exchange value (prestige, etc.); but this operation is still sustained by the alibi of use value (Baudrillard 1981, 112).

Today, I want to focus on one aspect of the blockbuster enterprise: the exhibition catalogue. Catalogues warrant special attention because, I contend, they are sites where the multiple and often conflicting values of the blockbuster exhibition intersect. The catalogue is the published record of the exhibition, a research output written by curators and experts for a peer and popular audience. We learn about art and artists when we read the catalogue. It is a souvenir and an aide-memoire, a visual memento of the masterpieces we saw in the crowded gallery space. The blockbuster catalogue is also merchandise, a commodity we buy in the exhibition shop, along with postcards, fridge magnets, coffee cups, and other art paraphernalia. It is branded with the logos and testimonials of political and corporate sponsors, who extol the virtues of art and culture. Indeed, nothing denotes an exhibition’s blockbuster status more than a large and lavishly illustrated catalogue.

The exhibition catalogue has a special status in the symbolic hierarchy of blockbuster merchandise. This legitimacy is derived from the catalogue’s unique association with the aesthetic and scholarly aims of the exhibition. A legitimacy, in turn, which is derived from the art museum’s aesthetic mission: to educate and edify

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the public. For this reason, the catalogue is a necessary commodity, one that serves to justify and validate the blockbuster’s legitimacy in aesthetic and scholarly terms. As one commentator has put it, the catalogue is “the single most important commodity associated with a blockbuster” and “the one with the greatest intellectual respectability” (Barker 1999, 133).

When (and why) did the catalogue become an emblem of legitimacy? To begin with, it will help if we placed Australian blockbusters into an historical and social context. Based on Vera Zolberg’s (Zolberg 1981) historical sociology of American art museums, we can posit that Australia’s public galleries underwent a similar (although later) process of professionalisation. Supported by the establishment of academic art history in Australian universities, the professionalisation of the public galleries developed in the mid-1960s. The blockbuster exhibition, as we know it, originated in this country in the 1970s. It is not a coincidence that the first blockbusters occurred in a decade in which the administration of culture became a government priority in Australia. I have previously argued that cultural diplomacy was a key rationale behind the Commonwealth’s involvement in major art exhibitions (Berryman 2013). Indeed, the provision of Commonwealth indemnification made blockbuster exhibitions feasible.

The Chinese Exhibition of 1977, managed by the short-lived Australian Art Exhibitions Corporation, was the first Australian-made blockbuster.2 The Chinese Exhibition enabled Australia’s public galleries to demonstrate their newly acquired professional expertise, especially in the area of exhibition presentation. An impressive 128-page catalogue was produced for this show; this souvenir catalogue proved very popular with the public, of which 155,000 copies were sold. Later, under the aegis of the Australian Gallery Directors’ Council, blockbuster catalogues grew in

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2 Joanna Mendelssohn made the valid point that Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse preceded The Chinese Exhibition. This exhibition, curated by William Lieberman, Director of Drawings at MoMA, was mounted under the auspices of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. It set new attendance records at both the AGNSW and the NGV, where in a short two-month period in mid-1975 it attracted a total audience of almost 350,000 people. A third and final showing took place at MoMA between August and September 1975. I consider Modern Masters a precursor to the Australian-made blockbusters that followed; according to the Australia Council, its success “indicated the potential audience for the visual arts in Australia.” The Chinese Exhibition was first mooted in 1974, to commemorate the establishment of diplomatic relations between Australia and the People’s Republic of China in 1972. Jean Battersby, Executive Officer of the Australia Council, was sent to China to negotiate a collection of 233 Chinese archaeological artefacts.
sophistication, notable for their detailed documentation, comprehensive illustration, and art historical information. The trend towards professional—that is, art historical—catalogues culminated in 1985, with the publication of *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond*. This catalogue set the standard for curatorial scholarship. Organised by the International Cultural Corporation of Australia and the NGV, *Golden Summers* was then Australia’s most successful exhibition. Most importantly, it offered hope that the blockbuster’s popular appeal could be matched with serious art-historical content.

Blockbuster mania reached its peak in 1988, the so-called ‘year of exhibitions’ to mark the bicentenary. But at this time, a major shift in policy direction had started to occur. Arts administrators and gallery directors began to tout the benefits of private sector engagement. In the 1990s, ‘audience development’ became the catchword of arts bureaucrats and funding bodies. This cultural policy paradigm coincided with an economic rationalist agenda in Canberra, in which the arts and cultural sector was redefined as a culture industry. Conveniently for cash-strapped museums, this policy outlook allowed cultural development programs to link the logic of cultural pluralism with the economic logic of neoliberalism (Gibson 2001; Bennett 1989). ‘Cultural sector’ is now used in preference to ‘culture industry,’ which in economic parlance defines a sector broadly involved in the production and consumption of cultural goods and services (Throsby 2001). Of the changes affecting the blockbuster exhibition in recent decades, efforts to align the arts with the lucrative tourist economy have been most significant. Today, nothing symbolises the culture-tourism-economic nexus more than the seasonal blockbuster.

However, as art museums responded to pressures to make their exhibitions more inclusive and representative of audience tastes and interests, they risked alienating their core audience with popular crowd-pleasers. The Australian art historian Bernard Smith was ambivalent about blockbusters. He opposed the commercialisation of curatorship and questioned the art historical merits of many so-called ‘Masterpieces of’ type shows. In particular, Smith criticised populist temporary exhibitions for detracting time and resources from the care and maintenance of permanent collections (Berryman, 2016). In Australia and abroad, professional opinion was starting to turn against the blockbuster (‘Editorial’ 1986; Smith 1988).
However, to counter professional disquiet, blockbuster supporters could also invoke professional values to defend these ventures. In 1986, when Albert Elsen argued his case for the blockbuster in *Art and America*, he was determined to promote the scholarly merits of these exhibitions. The catalogue was central to his argument. He wrote:

> The blockbuster not only permits but encourages scholarly cooperation rather than rivalry and duplication. The best blockbuster catalogues are written by teams of scholars whose knowledge of their fields is thorough and up-to-date. It is no small matter that their scholarship is promptly and handsomely published. Because they are issued in very large editions, much larger than those of the average scholarly book, exhibition catalogues can be priced within the means of students as well as the public. Blockbusters are undoubtedly major contributions to scholarship and public knowledge. (Elsen 1986, 27)

When defending her blockbuster programme to a professional audience, Betty Churcher, former director of the National Gallery of Australia, echoed Elsen’s arguments. Churcher, who was known in the press as ‘Betty Blockbuster,’ used catalogues to demonstrate her commitment to art-historical knowledge. ‘It is well to remember,’ she informed her audience on one occasion,

> that some of the most revealing and innovative art historical writing is to be found in the catalogues that accompany blockbuster exhibitions. More than anything else, the blockbuster encourages scholarly cooperation, and its catalogue, generally written by a team of experts, becomes a lasting contribution to art literature. (Churcher 1994, 89)

Indeed, scholarly collaboration can offer a compelling and legitimate rationale for blockbuster exhibitions. The catalogue of the National Gallery’s *Surrealism: A Revolution by Night* blockbuster from 1993 was a case in point. Churcher was keen to remind her peers that this catalogue was critically acclimated. But efforts to appease their professional and academic audience placed art museums in yet another dilemma. They now risked marginalising the lay public, which wanted to read generalist and not specialist information about art. Donald Horne, who was chairman of the Australia Council during the pivotal blockbuster years between 1985 and 1990, commended the public galleries on their “big improvement” in catalogue quality. But at the same time, he noted, “these excellent catalogues were excellent for people in
the know” (Horne 1990, 4). In other words, the lay public did not care too much about scholarly collaboration; these excellent, indeed expert, catalogues were exclusive and elitist. Horne’s observations had been empirically tested. In 1969, when Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel undertook their pioneering sociological study of European art museums and their audiences, they reached the same conclusion. They noted,

Because buying a guidebook or a catalogue presupposes a whole attitude to the work of art, the use of these sorts of handbooks which provide a programme of informed perception is above all characteristic of the most cultivated visitors, so much so that they only ever initiate those who are already initiated. (Bourdieu & Darbel 1990, 62)

Vera Zolberg, a sociologist of art, coined the phrase ‘Tension of Mission’ to describe the conundrum faced by art museums when they attempt to establish a practical balance between two legitimate, yet competing, goals. While art museums have a social responsibility to make art available to the general public, through educational programmes and popular initiatives such as blockbusters, they also have a professional responsibility to support the expert needs of their professional and academic peers. Balancing these conflicting demands can be a cause of philosophical as well as organisational tension. As Zolberg explains:

Museums run the risk of being accused of allowing fine art to generate into a “mere” commodity, or something akin to commercial entertainment. On the one hand, art museums have an interest in providing sanctuary for study or quiet appreciation; on the other, they are impelled to provide service to a broad public whose very presence jeopardizes this goal. (Zolberg 1986, 186)

This internal ‘tension of mission’ quandary affects the exhibition catalogue like no other art commodity. As it struggled to reconcile the imperatives of popular and commercial appeal with the intellectual requirements of the expert reader, the blockbuster catalogue became a deeply confused product. Of course, this predicament was not confined to Australia. The following observations were written in response to European experiences:

Exhibition catalogues had increasingly to fulfil a duel function, namely to be simultaneously popular (= market requirements) and respectable (= scientific). The intention was to attract the entertainment-seeking amateur audience, whose way of looking at things had been moulded by TV and print-media,
through the luxuriousness of catalogues, which could be seen as attractive illustrated books as well as prestigious “coffee-table books”. At the same time, experts valued the scientific content, professional catalogue essays and careful documentation, chronologies, and detailed catalogue entries (Lutz 1999, 6).

Making exhibition catalogues more attractive and accessible to disparate audiences has not been easy. Generally, there has been a tendency to produce catalogues that satisfy the needs and interests of the generalist reader at the expense of the expert reader. In terms of catalogue format, the narrative-friendly thematic catalogue has been particularly popular for blockbuster exhibitions. These catalogues will frequently attain the appearance of art history textbooks: heavily illustrated, though light on original research. Methodologically, art is gently contextualised within a familiar social history narrative. Contemporary academic theory and traditional art history (for example, formalism and connoisseurship) are largely absent. Also, and perhaps most importantly, this format continues to promote the heroic ideal of the artist. Blockbuster exhibitions have been accused of perpetuating a popular mythology of art as masterpiece and artist as genius. Thus, exhibitions are built around a handful of famous names and charismatic pieces. For this reason, Shearer West has criticised blockbusters for giving “a limited, misleading and distorted perspective on the history of art by attempting to satisfy the public’s desire for familiarity” (West 1995, 80).

The pressures of exhibition retailing have profoundly affected the catalogue’s design and production qualities. Of course, illustration accounts for most of the blockbuster catalogue’s prodigious size. Critics of this trend decry the massive expansion in catalogue size as largely cosmetic, designed to add the illusion of scholarly substance to exhibitions of declining art-historical value. Conservative art critic Hilton Kramer complained that, “like the art world that produces them, these wondrously glossy publications have lately enjoyed a period of overexpansion in size and pretension while at the same time tracing a course of diminished intellectual returns” (Kramer 1991, 87). This sentiment is not confined to reactionary critics. It tallies with Shearer West’s observations that the large and glossy blockbuster catalogue [is quite] literally “meant to exemplify the ‘weight of learning’” (West 1995, 84).
To conclude, the catalogue is the product where the pressures of exhibition-retailing and exhibition sponsorship most clearly overlap. But unlike retailing, in which galleries make money by selling merchandise to the public, sponsorship involves selling marketing and public relations opportunities to funders, usually major corporations. Sponsors sponsor blockbuster exhibitions because they want to be identified with art, or to be associated with the prestige and status that fine art represents. Sponsors, therefore, will have an interest in preserving art’s aura. “It is important to keep in mind,” we are reminded from an American study, “that contrary to what some critics have argued, corporations do not want to fund some mindless pabulum. Rather, the art itself must retain some legitimacy if the ‘halo effect’ is to work its magic.” (Alexander 1996, 29)

The association of sacred art with the profane corporate name will be tarnished if art is reduced to a mere commodity. The same can be said about the catalogue if reduced to mere merchandise. As the product with the greatest intellectual respectability, it must stand above the paraphernalia of the exhibition shop. When it comes to blockbusters, aesthetic value is converted to economic value and sign value, in the form of corporate distinction and branding. If the exhibition is to retain a semblance of legitimacy, beyond economics and public relations, this transaction must maintain a symbolic ‘alibi.’ The catalogue is called upon to perform this role. It is needed to justify the venture on aesthetic and scholarly grounds.

References


