A Symptomatic Museum: The New, the NMA and the Culture Wars

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Each person's story has a place in the life of Australia.

Take Arthur Stace, "Mr Eternity". At least 50 times a day for 30 years he wrote the word "Eternity" in chalk on the streets of Sydney. His simple, enduring message can still make people stop, think and feel.

Share all the emotion as the selected stories unfold. And you're invited to add your own: in writing, through video, via sounds.

Laugh. Feel fear. Fall in love. Take a chance.

—National Museum of Australia wall text

1. The National Museum of Australia's preference for the everyday and affect is prominent in its signature exhibition, Eternity. Announced with the tag, "Stories from the emotional heart of Australia", Eternity is meant to be immediately accessible to visitors, offering a unique experience, both sentimental and nostalgic. Eschewing objects and facts, the display names and seeks to evoke a series of sensations, feelings and emotions. Ten of these, including "Fear", "Joy", "Thrill", and "Mystery", provide the core themes which encourage visitors to interact subjectively with the Museum; to relate to the stories and images on display through, and as part of, their own personal, anecdotal, and everyday experiences. Arthur Stace is the central character in this exhibition. Although identifying closely with his hometown of Sydney, the NMA nominates Mr Stace as a national icon because of his practice of repeatedly writing the single word "eternity" in chalk on city pavements over many years. This exhibition is directive in nature. It indicates the key strategies used throughout the Museum, and demonstrates the disposition that should be adopted by visitors as they travel through the Museum. The injunction to participate, "you're invited", provides a space for the visitor to occupy: this is where we belong. By opening up an experience for visitors to respond to subjectively, the Museum articulates its pedagogical imperative that meaning is produced through the active and emotional engagement of the visitor with the material and stories on display.

2. Our argument in this essay is that a central focus on emotion is one of the ways in which the NMA marks itself as a new museum. We want to explore the shape of this newness as a way of re-framing the role of the NMA in the culture wars (where emotions don't stand up as a form of defence). The NMA was purposefully created as an institution with a cultural mission that was innovative, progressive and democratic. Through a range of strategies, it aimed to be controversial and confronting, to provide sparks for public disputation and dialogue. As the Director of this new museum, Dawn Casey explained; "In designing the new museum facility we have provided a number of spaces where debate and discussion will be possible in an information-rich environment and within a framework of mutual respect." (Casey, 2001b: 3) As part of the same logic, the NMA invited the Australian public to feel a sense of ownership for the institution and its exhibitions, a call, we'll suggest, that was welcomed in the popular press and elsewhere. In other words, far from being a victim of the culture wars, the NMA was a player in the culture wars. Yet when the Museum's cultural politics actually generated politics within its own Council, in the pages of Quadrant and then finally in the Review of the National Museum of Australia, its
Exhibitions and Public Programs, a Report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, hereafter referred to as the Carroll Report), such responses seemed far from welcome. So our paradox is this: how did the NMA’s success in generating cultural controversy become the ground on which the institution then suffered a significant political defeat? Our preliminary response is that this conundrum might be thought of symptomatically: as illustrating some of the limits to the NMA’s exhibitionary program and its inability to see-through the logic of its cultural project. While the Museum, and some of its supporters and officers, has certainly been subjected to explicit political assault, we do not think that the cultural politics of the NMA is usefully understood only as a story of a progressive institution reeling from sustained conservative attack. In reconsidering this story we want to situate the NMA’s predicament in the cultural wars as a product of its cultural politics, and to explore what was enabled and constrained by the Museum’s cultural location and its own self-reflexive orientation to cultural authority.

New Museums

3. As a new museum, the NMA can be described according to a series of characteristics that it shares with other similar museums worldwide, including New Zealand’s National Museum, Te Papa Tongarewa, Daniel Libeskind’s extension to the Jewish Museum in Berlin, and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia. (Veracini & Muckle, 2003) The directors, designers and curators of the NMA aimed to develop a museum that was new in design, exhibitions, programs and feel. (Casey, 2003: 4-5) Indeed, the Museum’s dedication to developing a new and experiential space was responsible, in part at least, for attracting the political and economic support necessary for the Museum’s development in the first place. (Reed 2002) As with other new museums, the NMA’s commitment to novelty is legible, in the first instance, in its built form. While there is a great deal more that could be said about the Ashton Raggatt McDougall design for the NMA, for our purposes here, its principle function is to announce the newness of the institution; an arresting building explicitly designed as a dialogue of fragments, citing and juxtaposing references to architectural icons from Eero Saarinen’s TWA Terminal in New York to Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum. (Macarthur, 2001: 56) At the same time, the building announces itself as innovative and different, so newness extends through its form and the suggestions marking its skin to the building’s plan, its articulation of indigenous and settler galleries, the Garden of Australian Dreams (designed by Room 4.1.3 Landscape Architecture and Design) and the curatorial approach enabled in the exhibition spaces. Indeed, as John Macarthur has commented, the plethora of references marking the exterior of the building come to stand in for the Museum’s approach to storytelling and “the associated development of the national character.” He suggests that we can read the architecture of the building and the garden as offering a series of rhetorical figures that:

are then the basis for an allegory. The allegory of Australian history as tangled stories being formed in the purposeful knot of citizenship requires an exegesis of the kind the Museum’s guides and pamphlets will undoubtedly provide. The architectural allegory has the same structure. It is an occasion for conversation, for storytelling. (Macarthur, 2001: 58)

4. Within the NMA, therefore, concrete and interpretative factors contribute in the production of a site and experience that presents its facts, truths and knowledges as being intimately connected with an active and provocative approach to storytelling. These factors combine to declare the NMA from the outset as a brand-new institution offering new experiences. (National Museum of Australia, 2002: 7)

5. Equally, and as an extension of this allegorical function, the NMA’s design locates the institution in the domain of the popular. Like the extraordinarily successful Te Papa, the NMA aimed to draw a large and demographically diverse audience from Canberra, as well as Australian and international tourists. Consistent with these strategic aims, the NMA was designed to be a participant in the leisure sector, competing with other events and experiences offered by festivals, cinema, theatre, sports, galleries and shopping. It was to be an institution that would not rely on old certainties. Its built form and curatorial practices would not be traditional but would embrace and address public knowledge and popular culture; it would mobilise new academic modes of thought such as postmodernism and postcolonial modes of questioning, as well as speak to politics, public policy, culture, and other cultural institutions. (Jencks, 2003: 66-67) Its breadth of interests would extend to include recent and contemporary events (with references to the Sydney Opera House and
the 2000 Olympic Games), and even everyday aspects of contemporary cultural life.

6. Despite offering similar kinds of digitally-enhanced experiences and interpretive approaches toward their exhibition material, new museums around the world have tried to avoid homogeneity by engaging with their specific political and cultural environments. Thus many of these museums focus on the nation and aim to encourage visitors to reassess their ideas about national identity, and reconsider the roles of cultural institutions in relation to national identity. In this sense, the NMA was to be a museum dedicated to the presentation of a new, progressive, dynamic and reflexive vision of national history which had two key features; visitors were to understand history as a product of the present, and the stories of everyday Australians were to be represented as constituting national identity. To achieve the first objective, the Museum becomes a playful de-mythologist celebrating storytelling in preference to archival authority. It's an approach that deploys political protest banners and sequined Mardi Gras costumes, ponders national celebrations and holidays, and explores the early days of broadcasting.

7. The NMA was to be new from the ground up. It re-drew the boundaries of national identity so that the Museum was foundationally national and, at the same time, incoherently national in back-projecting the nation onto the entire history of human occupation of the continent: "Already more than 1.6 billion people have lived in Australia, 32 million since 1788," proffers the main wall text introducing the Eternity exhibition. (National Museum of Australia wall text) The Museum animates or humanises the nation—the life of Australia—and then, in seemingly democratic or populist fashion, builds the larger entity from its constituent parts, where, according to the same label, "each person's story has a place". Within this configuration of the nation, Arthur Stace becomes a paradigmatic figure. (Stell, 2001: x) As both metonym and allegory, he stands in for each person's story and, drone-like, leaves his trace. He's a fascinating choice for these roles because of the ambiguity of his declaration, "Eternity"; it's rhetorical and empty, it's sacred and deeply irrational, it's obsessively banal and meaningful. The major exhibitionary function of Eternity for the NMA is that an experience of the word (and/or this story in the Museum) can "make people stop, think and feel". (National Museum of Australia wall text) This outlines the pedagogic program of the NMA. Textual aspects of the exhibitions (including the incorporation of visitor stories and responses) further communicate the Museum's focus on the ambiguous, the emotional, and the experiential. Eternity also illustrates the Museum's attempt to put the exhibitionary apparatus on display, so that the production of meaning itself becomes a theme for visitor consideration. Experience is broken down into a series of fragments or keywords that audiences will piece together into individual narratives or versions of events.

8. In addition to foundational newness, the NMA understood itself as an ideological institution that would undo its own authority. Again, its first move was a de-mythologising gesture that asked visitors to question everything; especially the possibility that they were—or could ever be—adequately represented by a singular or universally shared symbol of national cohesion and identity. This is indicated from the outset, where, instead of projecting authority and certainty, a textured external wall on the building's façade is rumoured to write "Sorry" in Braille. (Macarthur 2001: 58) Indeed it could be said that much of the building consists of rhetorical tricks, illusions, citation and play; and that in this form, it offers a version of classical architectural deconstruction. In terms of the exhibitions, the strategy of demythologisation is pursued less in spatial terms than through language. However, this produces some conundrums for the NMA. For example, "Eternity" comes to mean both everything and nothing. It is both an empty signifier and a key signature in a Museum that appears to privilege the sign, word and map above all other cultural documents. (Weller, 2002: 136)

9. The focus on textuality functions as a key signifier of the Museum's newness: The Museum proposes the incomplete formations and broken sentences of everyday language as an antidote to the proper languages of the academic disciplines of history; and at the same time suggests, in a characteristically postmodern fashion, distrust in the mutability of language as well as its authoritarian tendencies. So while the Museum cannot do away with (abstract) notions such as "national identity" or "the Australian way", more often than not, such notions are subordinated to everyday life as the space of real meaning and significance. "Eternity" works in precisely this way; a peculiar and particular instance that opens onto meanings, emotions and experiences in everyday life. The Museum seeks out
and celebrates ordinary everyday Australians who are neither iconic nor exemplary, and who cannot be typified by any singular model, but who, like the skien of allegorical references and storytelling strategies used and imagined throughout the site and its surrounds, call forth a cacophony of voices, perspectives and experiences that refuse unity and disclosure. Rather than attempting to achieve resolution of the component parts into a convincing, singular meta-narrative form, the NMA appears to celebrate difference and push contradiction to the fore. Given this strategy, it's not surprising that the Museum refuses to present history as a singular, universally symbolic, or monumental concept, and instead attempts to communicate to its visitors that its approach is re-presentational, and as such, up for debate. To some extent, this becomes an intellectual project that historicizes representation itself. It is, however, also directed toward demonstrating (through the use of non-authentic objects and replicas) the possibility that history itself may be a "fake"—something that is made and shaped by ideological processes both within and beyond the space of the Museum. Consistent with this project, is the NMA’s privileging of ordinary Australians, whom it represents in anti-heroic displays that incorporate ordinary objects and reproductions more often than treasures. (Casey, 2002: 21) Exhibition designer W. Scott Guerin has claimed that this approach democratises the objects on display. (Anway & Guerin, 2002: 163) In the exhibition dedicated to suburban Australia, for instance, culturally significant but inexpensive everyday items like the Hills Hoist clothesline stand alongside replica objects (including the historically significant 1901 Federation Arch) and Howard Arkley’s spray-paint simulations of hyper-real suburbia. Rather than a didactic display, the effect is of an eclectic ensemble that sabotages suburbia, history and the artefact all at once!

10. This privileging of the signs and modes of communication endemic to the everyday is carried through to the objects and images that the NMA displays within its thematically driven exhibition spaces. It rejects the high-cultural reading associated with meta-narrative forms of history, and is instead heavy with wall text that provides the visitor with extensive possible interpretations of the material on display. The wall texts include quotations that are both authoritative and eccentric, from a mixture of famous and notable people and also from everyday Australians. The sources are rendered free from hierarchical ordering, so that each statement—regardless of its speaker—is presented as equal to all others. Because of this, or perhaps due to the practice of displaying objects and images that are on loan from other state, national, or individual collections, the exhibitions are polymorphous and have a sense of incompleteness (highlighted perhaps by the exhibition of Phar Lap’s disembodied heart).

11. The currency and cultural cachet associated with contemporary museum projects like the NMA is primarily due to the ways that they have been conceptualised, designed, produced, and spoken about in accord with conceptions of, and concerns with the privileged effects of newness according to a series of self-consciously new strategies of representation and approaches to museology. (Witcomb 2003: 3; Luke : 3) In aspiring to this goal, the NMA has produced a newness effect at the same time as it has been committed to displaying the ways in which these effects are produced. The NMA appears not to shy away from the logic of these approaches, refusing even the significance and cultural authority that is usually associated with a national museum. (Chakrabarty, 2003: 5-12) Inversion thus becomes part of the Museum’s official story about itself, as its publicity claims: "The Museum is itself an exhibit, an attraction, the opposite of the white box or black box museums that have traditionally been merely backdrops for artefacts enclosed in glass cases. It is an emotionally engaging part of the NMA’s story, interpreting and commenting on Australia in its very structure." (National Museum of Australia 2002: 19) But where do these strategies of programmatic, exhibitionary, discursive and symbolic newness leave the NMA as a cultural institution?

12. Our sense is that these strategies have left the NMA as a cultural institution in a difficult and complex space, an in-between space. The NMA has positioned itself as a new institution in part through its engagement with diverse fields; history and public policy, national identity and the media, popular culture and the public sphere, tourism and academic debate. At the same time it has refused to claim the traditional authority of (national) museums as being able to represent, and speak authoritatively about, those things that properly belong in its domain. In animating debate across such a range of political and cultural fields, the Museum ran the risk of being unable to defend the ground from which it chose to speak. And this is what happened when the NMA was also
compelled to engage with the culture wars.

**Culture Wars**

*When the National Museum of Australia opened its doors on March 11 last year, it was already a war zone…*

*National Museum of Australia council member David Barnett had written an angry five-page memo to chairman Tony Staley, asking why the Museum appeared to lionize popular culture figures, dissidents and criminals but overlooked nation-building Australians…*

*Critics wrote that the Museum mocked and trivialized white history by displaying Australia’s wide range of “big” attractions while not mentioning Qantas or the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme.*

*Fans viewed it as an interactive, contemporary record of Australian culture with none of the dustiness of a traditional museum.*

—Crabb, 2002a: 1.

13. There is little doubt that the NMA "was already a war zone" when it opened in 2001. It’s also plain that the disputations were, in part, the result of determined efforts by conservative culture warriors. The characterisation of the NMA as a culturally progressive institution white-anted by the right has been made by a number of commentators, and it is a persuasive if partial argument. (Safe, 2003: 6; Moodie, 2003: 34) However our interest here is less in reiterating this tale, than in considering how the NMA’s predicament can be considered as, in part, a symptom of the programs and strategies pursued by the NMA itself, and whether some of the short-term defeats that the NMA suffered in the subsequent skirmishes might be symptomatic of the incoherence of the NMA’s orientation to the culture wars. So, let us turn first to consider the shape of terrain on which the war was conducted, and to some questions of the battles and tactics.

14. Initially, disputation about the NMA emerged at the Council level and took the form of what we might describe as a traditional conservative response to challenging historical exhibitions. These objections were made in a memo from David Barnett (a Museum Councillor and, along with his wife, Pru Goward, biographer of John Howard) to Tony Staley (Chair of the Council and former Federal President of the Liberal Party) in October 2000. This correspondence and the resulting consultant’s report were subsequently leaked to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. (Morgan, 2001) Barnett’s objections, focused largely on exhibition labels, were traditional in the sense that he went hunting for bias and found plenty. The NMA, to Barnett’s mind, was enamoured with victim history; as he wrote of Label 0826-70: "Heather Rose. Another unfortunate. The way to get a place in the Museum is to have something terrible befall you". According to Barnett, the NMA was politically partisan in that it championed "unfortunates" like workers and stolen children and ignored the contributions of great Australians such as H. R. Nicholls and Charles Copeman; blighted by political correctness it preached the doctrine of black armband history.

15. On the advice of Geoffrey Blainey, Staley appointed Graeme Davison, a senior and respected professor of history at Monash University with no strong party-political identification, to conduct a review the NMA signage. This was a straightforward task for Davison. All he was required to do was assess the scholarly adequacy of the labels. In his report to the Council, Davison found no systematic bias in the NMA:

> An underlying theme in David’s remarks is a concern that the commentary in the labels expresses a kind of systematic bias in the interpretation of Australian history. My view … is that while individual items may express interpretations that David might regard as PC, they are not preponderant. (Morgan, 2001)

He went on to argue that:

> If every label has to be acceptable to every visitor then the result will be a very bland museum. … I hold the view that a museum can be simultaneously provocative and in a certain sense impartial, not in a sense that it won’t register strongly partisan viewpoints but that the role of the council and director is to make sure there’s a variety of viewpoints expressed in the institution. (Morgan, 2001)
And as far as Davison was concerned this is exactly what the NMA had achieved; true to the mission laid out in the 1975 Pigott Report which urged the foundation of a museum that "should display controversial issues" (Piggott et. al. 1975, section 12.2), the NMA was a forum for debate.

16. But Davison then deployed his considerable academic authority to judge not only the Museum but also to paint Barnett as both politically motivated and as lacking the capacities to adequately appraise the questions on which he had been so vocal. He wrote,

The thrust of David Barnett's intervention was, in a sense, ideological. … David gives the impression—which I am sure he does not really hold—that the Museum should follow the historical views of the government of the day. … I am sure [he wrote to Staley] that this is not your view, or that of the Council. The objective must be to ensure that whatever historical interpretations are expressed by the Museum can survive changes of governments and councils. (Morgan, 2001)

Indeed later, in the context of the appointment of the committee that would produce the Carroll Report, Davison redirected the accusation of political bias back to the Museum's critics, in part on the basis of his academic and disciplinary authority as a historian. He was later reported as having:

warned… that the appointment of the review panel, which does not include any historians, was a political decision that could be viewed as direct interference in a cultural institution. "I am concerned that if successive governments insist upon placing a political imprint of their own political outlook on the Museum, that this would be a debilitating process for the curatorial staff and it will also risk losing credibility," he said. (Qtd in Crabb, 2002a: 1)

In other words, Davison implied that the critics, not the curators, were working to an ideologically formed agenda. In retrospect it’s clear that Davison’s findings, that the NMA was innocent of the charge of political bias, were in a sense determined by the relatively crude nature of Barnett’s objections. (Macintyre & Clark, 2003: 11) In this sense, later when Staley argued that, "It is not the role of the National Museum to function as an advocate for causes, no matter how worthwhile they might be judged to be by the fashion of the day" (Crabb, 2002b: 2), Casey had no hesitation in agreeing whole-heartedly; "The integrity of museum scholarship should not be compromised by the ideological flavour of the month". (Qtd in Safe & Yallop, 2002: 4)

17. Of course accusations of political bias in relation to cultural institutions can be batted back and forth for a considerable period of time if the rules of the game imagine (on the surface at least) politics to be divorced from a representational site and that political impartiality is an appropriate cultural aspiration. Davison halted the game momentarily by virtue of his academic authority. But he also made clear that the initial objections from the Museum’s detractors had been made too narrowly. In reply to the question, "Is this sign accurate and without bias?", an academic authority had vouched for both historical veracity and the legitimacy of the Museum’s interpretations. Thus thwarted, the Museum’s critics refined their strategy: first, in a power-play that resulted in the establishment of a new and externally imposed and constituted review; and second, by shifting the terms of debate and appraising the Museum in its own terms. The Carroll Report took an evaluative rather than an empirical approach to the questions; "What kinds of stories does the Museum tell, how does it tell them and to what effects?" (16-19)

18. In January of 2003, Staley announced the establishment of the major review into the Museum’s exhibitions and public programs. Directed to report back to the Museum Council within the year, the review committee consisted of Richard Longes (Deputy Chairman of Lend Lease Corporation), Philip Jones (South Australian Museum curator), and Patricia Vickers-Rich (Monash University professor of palaeontology). Heading the committee was La Trobe University professor of sociology, John Carroll. To the surprise of some commentators, the resulting Carroll Report praised many aspects of the NMA, rejected the judgement that the Museum lacked balance and noted the success of the First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 20. Further page references are provided in parentheses). Interestingly for our purposes, the Report recognised the importance of branding the Museum as new, so as to locate it as one of the world’s important new museums. (66) However, its criticisms were distinctive and challenging.
19. While appreciating the NMA’s attention to what it calls “more modest stories” (7), the Carroll Report articulates the concern that these small-scale stories of nation are not sufficiently inspirational. It felt that this strategy of representation did not engender the “You have to go there” reaction of audiences (3, 7, 71), required for the Museum to be an unquestioned success. Interestingly, this success was to be measured by visitor enjoyment: “Without enchantment there will be no true engagement.” (3) The Report was—at least in this respect—open to what we might call the methodologies of enchantment that were so important to the NMA’s self-image. The point of difference was that while the NMA privileged the untold and disparate stories of nation, the Carroll Report felt that these stories were not engaging enough, and were not adequate replacements for more important (traditional) stories of nation which, it argued, has secured their familiar place for good and sound reasons. It was concerned that the objects and narratives employed remained too decontextualized to be properly readable by audiences as key contributors to the national story:

Museum exhibits that do not work by means of an enchanting focal object are all the more dependent on generating engaging narratives. Any move to rely in exhibitions on symbols on their own—for instance, symbols of national identity such as the Hills Hoist, the FJ Holden or the meat pie—will fail, unless the symbol is drawn out by means of a narrative that provides context and perspective. (7)

Regardless of its appreciation of choices made in relation to the NMA’s appropriation of new and interdisciplinary methodologies, the review committee’s own position—which “had overwhelming consensus among those consulted by the Panel” (7)—aimed to re-position “the centrality of narrative as the necessary method of museum presentation.” (7) So although it understood—and even had sympathy for—the NMA’s representational strategies, its point about the Elgin marbles (artefacts which, the Report claims, are merely confusing if their viewer has no knowledge of classical Athens) shows that despite engaging with the NMA on its own terms, the Museum’s methods still failed to be convincing when juxtaposed against the more familiar, and singular, "story of history".

20. The Carroll Report puts to the NMA the challenge “to present the ordinary and the everyday in order to open up and reveal the national trait” (8), and herein lies the crux of the disagreement. Whereas the NMA’s dedication to the eclectic and unfamiliar was motivated by a desire to reveal "the national trait" as something that is itself multiple, constantly changing, and the product of contemporary systems of knowledge, enunciation and power, the phrasing used here in the Report represents the national trait as being something quite different. Both national character and national identity are privileged by the Report as removed from politics, almost innate or instinctive; things that will reveal themselves if given half a chance. But the Museum didn’t give national character and national identity their half chance. The NMA failed to adequately celebrate the key themes of Australian society. (13) The NMA was found to have not attended properly to sporting, business and scientific achievements, and "the more traditional themes of European discovery, exploration, convicts, settlement of the land, bushrangers, wool and wheat, fire and drought, and so forth". (9) And it has largely been these conclusions of the Report which have enabled subsequent critics to pan it as simple arch-conservatism. (Lundy, 2003) This seems to us a simplification of the Carroll Report, a document which is also part Director for the Day—I’d get rid of that ugly garden—part polemical intervention, and part wandering meditation on contemporary culture. For our purposes here, it is significant for having both acknowledged the importance of, and criticised as inadequate, one of the key markers of the Museum’s innovation; its emphasis on story-telling.

The symptomatic museum

But because the extreme views on both sides are unappealing and repetitive, the debate is in danger of becoming bogged down in simplistic oppositions, with the NMA being used as a battleground by both sides. The Museum’s exhibitions seem to be up for grabs by contesting interests—whoever wins the history wars gets the right to impose their story.


21. The NMA was drawn into the culture wars because it addressed culturally contentious topics and it did so through particular exhibitionary strategies. One of the Museum’s objectives was to provide a forum for public consideration of the culture wars debate, where it was hoped visitors would engage critically with the exhibitions according to the
diverse terms of discussion suggested by its interdisciplinary approach. (Casey, 2001a: 23)

At the same time, as we have seen, the Museum attracted criticism in a number of registers. The central issue here is that in playing the role of host to a discussion about questions at stake in the culture wars, the Museum made two contradictory claims: first, that the Museum could and should incite controversy and debate, in other words, that it could and should actively intervene in the culture wars; and second, that the Museum was outside of these culture wars as a space of political transcendence or neutrality, a position that was explicitly critiqued in the Museum’s very exhibitions.

22. The incoherence of this predicament is not surprising and may well be inevitable. As a national institution that relies on funding from a representative government, that aimed to be cutting edge, popular and culturally relevant; a new museum hosting and contributing to controversy and enamored with reflexive and emotionally engaging techniques of narrative and exhibition, it was inevitable that the NMA would become a player in the culture wars. (Davison, 2001: 26) Indeed Te Papa Tongarewa, and the recent extension to the Jewish Museum in Berlin have also attracted similar controversies. (Neill, 2004: 188-89) The NMA provoked debate over the basic characteristics and constituents of a national museum; whose stories should be told, and according to which frameworks?

Unsurprisingly the question of public ownership—of the Museum itself and the knowledge and stories represented by it—a complex question in the case of cultural institutions, was part of the mix.

23. And so we come to the heart of the paradox of the NMA and the culture wars. On the one hand, the exhibitionary logic of the NMA effectively argues that rigour is too often equated with authority and that bias is part of the processes of debate, interpretation and civic participation. Yet when it comes to the real politics of budgets, the appointment of directors, and parliamentary politics, ground cannot be contested as if it were a mere play of interpretation. Barnett’s critical intervention and Davison’s absolution of the Museum was conducted on traditional ideological and academic terrain. The next moment was very different; the Carroll Report, to some extent, assessed the Museum against its own terms—according to the effectiveness of its story-telling—while the Council moved against the Director. Yet at this moment, support for the Museum did not speak in the voice of this new museum. Instead it came from supporters like progressive museum workers (Marcus, 2003: 137), newspaper editorialists (Cassin, 2002: 15), and liberal academics like Graeme Davison (Davison, 2002: 17) and John Mulvaney (2003), all of whom were opposed to the political and ideological dimensions of the attacks. In a similar vein, Casey claimed that “the NMA [was] being used as a battleground by both sides”. Our point is that none of these defences is in fact inconsistent with the logics of the NMA as a new museum. The NMA has a developed account of the production of cultural authority yet no ways of resolving (if indeed its possible to resolve) its own institutional, cultural and political authority in relation to its reflexive exhibitionary logic.

24. The NMA continues to be a controversial institution following the release of the Carroll Report because of the incommensurability of its political status (as a national institution) and its cultural politics (as a challenging new museum). (Foot, 2004: 37-39) Developed in response to these concerns over the legitimacy of the Museum’s approach to story (and truth) telling, and rather than offering a resolution of its practices, the Carroll Report further evidences the paradox embodied by the NMA. Although the NMA and the Carroll Report have ostensibly addressed the same themes (of representation and the image of truth in the construction of national identity), each only succeeds fully in restating the paradox faced by cultural institutions like the NMA when they attempt to engage directly with political discourses. The NMA maintains a dedication to demonstrating the myths and legends and truths of nation as products of political and cultural institutions. Through its exhibitions, it argues that these institutions are essentially re-presentational, that they are effects of stories, histories and events, rather than existing as unquestionable truths. Thus it seeks to stage a dialogue between a culturally influential institution and the individual visitor, whereby an effective interaction is achieved so that the production of cultural meaning can be understood as a shared process that is jointly owned and authored. Instead of privileging any singular source, the NMA asserts authority as existing primarily with a multiplicity of visitors to and respondents of the Museum. But where does that leave a new museum under attack?

Back to Eternity
25. The popularity of the NMA might be a site through which the cultural politics of the Museum might be conceptualised differently. Supporters and detractors of the Museum alike have noted the popularity of the NMA. More than 1.5 million people visited the Museum between March 2001 and January 2003. Of more than 8,000 visitors interviewed, 91 percent responded that they were “satisfied or very satisfied with their visit” and, according to an “independent media review” cited by Casey, “only 2 per cent of media coverage over the previous 12 months had been unfavourable.” (Casey, 2003a: 31) In this vein, Ray Cassin argued that “The crucial fact about the Museum is that it is popular.” (Cassin, 2002: 15) He contends that visitors respond not only positively, but intelligently to the NMA’s strategies of representation and potentially difficult displays that challenge the visitor rather than reinforce popular stereotypes or historically enduring mythologies of nation: “Here are ordinary Australians being exposed to alternative views of the nation’s history, and taking it in their stride.” (Cassin, 2002: 15) Cassin, like many of the NMA’s exhibitions, grants the public the sophistication to respond to exhibits in independent ways. Rather than assuming that they believe every story that has been included, he suggests that they respond actively and in subjective ways. And in response to the NMA’s detractors he writes; “critics of the National Museum like to portray themselves as defenders of middle Australia and its values, but their criticism of the Museum’s displays do not fit this self-image. These are classic sufferers from the cultural cringe.” (Cassin, 2002: 15)

26. In a sense this takes us back to Eternity. We do not have any empirical evidence of visitor appraisals specific to Eternity. Nevertheless, it seems important to us that the populism that underpins the exhibition—that is, as a display which foregrounds everyday people in the production of national narratives instead of traditional heroes—has strong resonance for visitors and even for conservative commentators for whom it reads as politically neutral. (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 68) Eternity is a challengingly articulated exhibition; it links Mr Stace, a figure of emotional identification, to a project of national belonging: it’s an immediate and immersive display that also reaches into and connects with historical time; it’s an exhibition that is only really there when its filled out by talk, like other forms of spiritual display such as the mounted skin of Phar Lap at the Melbourne Museum. Eternity is also a display, like the best of the NMA more broadly, that wears its newness on its sleeve, not as a sign of something finished and complete but as a process of something like a new kind of museum coming into existence; a new kind of eclectic and interdisciplinary cultural institution which is perhaps, as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has argued, not yet ready to be born; and certainly not into the "Battleground of Ideas and Histories" (Casey, 2002) to which it must contribute.

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