Collecting with(in) the city

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Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

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Shaping new understandings of place through the intersection of creative practices and histories

Virginia Rigney

Biography

Virginia Rigney is Senior Curator Visual Arts at Canberra Museum and Gallery, the city museum of Australia's young national capital where she was born and educated. Over a thirty-year career in curatorial practice in Australia and the UK, she has worked at two other city museums, Glasgow and the Gold Coast in Queensland. One of her most recent projects *Canberra Kamberri People and Place* was awarded best permanent collection exhibition in the 2023 AMAGAs.

Curatorship combining contemporary visual arts and historical objects is growing increasingly important as a way of drawing out new and sometimes uncomfortable narratives within museums and historic sites. Less understood are the kinds of dialogue and collaborations involved, the trust required and risks and challenges inherent in these approaches.

Drawing on the experience of two recent projects curated by the author; one for a permanent collection exhibition and the other a temporary installation in a historic city property, this paper reflects on different curatorial considerations involving artists and artworks in dialogue with both the near and distant past. Placing objects from the past in dialogue with artworks from the present generates a new relational bond, one that may provoke new insights but also has the potential to be both confusing or confronting for audiences who may be more familiar with seeing the past as contained and distant.

Artworks have the potential to allow more porous interpretations of the historical past to come forward and to offer insights into the way that the past continues to inform contemporary life. But in this context an artwork is also in danger of becoming little more than a prop – its own vitality and intensity diminished by this new curatorially created partnership. I would argue that this is a false fear and that instead, through this relational dialogue, the potency and agency of both the historical artefact and the artwork can be significantly enhanced.

As the only dedicated museum of Canberra, Australia's National Capital, Canberra Museum and Gallery has a unique collecting role within a city of other national collecting institutions, to focus on the cultural and social history of the city itself. At Federation in 1901, the complex history of competitiveness of Australia's individual states led to the solution to instigate a wholly new city as the National Capital. By 1909 a site midway between the main cities of Sydney and Melbourne was identified and in 1912 a design competition was won by innovative Chicago based architects Marian Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin. Conventional histories of the city focus on a chronological narrative of purposeful creation by government planning and oversight, but the diverse and less known narratives of the city are absolutely there and our collection policy, established with the Museum's founding in 1998 advocated for this diversity. To the public however, the museum remained rigidly siloed in separating the two main collection streams of social history and visual arts in telling these stories. *The Canberra Kamberri Place and People* exhibition which opened in 2023, was the first time that the two collections were joined in the one permanent collection exhibition developed as a curatorial collaboration between Dr Hannah Paddon, Senior Curator Social History, and the author, Senior Curator Visual Arts. (See figure 1)

One of the primary objectives of the new exhibition was to introduce a much more evident narrative of First Nations history and culture into the commonly understood history of Canberra. The 1912 winning scheme by Walter and Marian Griffin sensitively responded to the landscape, creating a garden city based on innovative philosophical principals.

This principal narrative however diminished the recognition of the 6000-year history of First Nations peoples in the region. As curators we felt that the impact of transformation on First Nations people remained at an emotional arm's length for our audiences.

Figure 1: Kamberri Canberra, Nationhood finds a home Dean Cross (2023)

We challenged this narrative by using the concept of 'The Everywhen', the idea developed by First Nations Historians that expresses the concept of time as a simultaneous presence of past, present and future and that ancient knowledge is embedded in contemporary practices. Our strategy was to punctuate the chronological narrative through the integration of First Nations objects and artworks throughout the exhibition. One of these was the display of a small contemporary painting on canvas by artist Dean Cross in dialogue with one of the largest works and most prominent works in the collection. Cross is a Worimi man born in Canberra and his apparently simple text work immediately reads as something out of place against a large painting of richly detailed bright landscape of the Molonglo valley on a sunny summer's day. (FIG 1) This work was created in 1913 as an entry for a competition that the new Federal Government instigated to create greater public awareness and excitement towards the development of the new Capital city. Artists were instructed to paint an accurate landscape

view on a summer day so that viewers might imagine the new city coming to life on those vast plains. But what this competition assumed was that the land was indeed vacant. With its' text, 'Emptiness has never been so full', Cross immediately shatters that illusion to defiantly claim that in fact this is a landscape rich in the things that colonisers have chosen not to see ; the stories, song, knowledge systems and way finding embodied as Deep History within Country.

The second example in this article discusses the work of leading Canberra based artist eX de Medici for the 'Guns and Flowers' project where the artists' work was placed in contemporary dialogue with the nationally iconic 'Ned Kelly' series (1945-47) by Sidney Nolan (1917-1992) in the museum's gallery spaces and in one of our Historic sites. Ned Kelly remains vivid in Australia's national imagination as the most notorious colonial era bushranger, celebrated for his defiant rejection of oppression and vilified by others. Sidney Nolan's series, painted more than three generations later, teased out these lingering complexities and layered them with his own personal experience as a soldier during WWII who defied orders and absconded without leave.

As a leading contemporary artist eX de Medici has developed an unflinching practice that addresses the lingering presence of gun culture within global politics and domestic environments. A series of her large scale watercolours on paper featuring what she described as 'portraits' of historically famous guns, entwined with flowers and historical references were shown opposite Nolan's Ned Kelly series in the gallery space.

Nolan was taught, like any soldier, to use a firearm. As a city boy, he was initially surprised at his confidence with and connection to the weapon. He was to bring the experience of this personal familiarity with a gun to the 'Kelly' series that he commenced near the end of the war in 1945. But there was another factor at play. Nolan had failed to return to barracks in late 1944 and so was classified as AWOL until a general amnesty was declared in 1948, only then returning his kit and rifle. Living in virtual hiding, mostly within the semi-rural sanctuary of Heide, just outside Melbourne, it was on the dining room table there, in close collaboration with Sunday Reed, that most of the 'Kelly' series was painted. As Nolan's anxiety at his situation as a deserter lingered, *Return to Glenrowan*, one of the last works in the series from 1947, the masked Kelly figure shoulders and grips a .303 just as Corporal Nolan had been trained to do. With its darkened skies it becomes a haunting portrait of anxiety and isolation. To make this little-known relationship more evident to our audiences, a 303 rifle of the type that Sergeant Nolan would have used, was loaned from a nearby military museum and placed in an adjacent case to the painting.

Disarmingly alluring depictions of weapons, particularly guns, have been prominent within the paintings of eX de Medici[1], but they were also there at the beginning of her practice in the mid-1980s. Recognising that to render these weapons she would also need to understand them personally, she maintains a gun license. Each gun is meticulously observed and has its own specific historical provenance to the man (sic) who used it.

Figure 2: CMAG Guns and Flowers 2023 Sidney Nolan Return to Glenrowan

The fusions between uncomfortable pasts and fears for the future that were reflected in the works displayed in the gallery space, were also present in the site-specific installation by eX de Medici at Lanyon Homestead. The installation engaged with the narratives of Nolan's association with the property and further back, to the histories of the way that women's lives have been structured and contained in the colonial era and beyond. The wallpaper pattern of entwining pink roses set against a stripe was the linking point between all.

The artist site-specific installation was developed for one of the bedrooms in our historic property of Lanyon, which was built at the time of earliest colonial settlement, and which had once functioned as a gallery for Sidney Nolan's paintings. This was the first time our museum had presented a simultaneous contemporary exhibition across our venues – from the conventional gallery space to the historic property.

de Medici had noted the way that Nolan[2] referenced floral patterning in the 'Kelly' series in the attempted 'de-flowering' of Kate Kelly by Constable Fitzpatrick . In the Lanyon bedroom, built in 1905 for the young bride Louisa, who was encouraged to marry the squire of the estate, Andrew Cunningham, thirty years her senior, de Medici presented the large watercolour on paper Pink is for boys above the bed. The work is a portrait of her own gun, a Browning .222, bound tightly

in glorious deep pink satin, a reference to one of the artist's favourite works, the famous Holbein dual portrait *The Ambassadors* of 1533 held in the National Gallery London. The gun's barrel has evaporated into a wallpaper pattern of female hormone molecules and Australian flannel flowers. But this weapon is not useless. Like the artist herself, the sight remains clear and uncovered, looking with clarity and force to create visibility to the unseen. de Medici covered the four poster bed in swathes of the same pink satin and bound it tightly with black cord. The artists' recognisable aesthetic of strange beauty linking the artwork, the historical context of the room and this intervention with the furniture was deliberately confronting within this ostensibly gracious historical room.

The installation also featured an original photograph of Andrew and Louisa in white starched linen, on a hot Christmas Day just after their short-lived marriage in 1911 . On what should

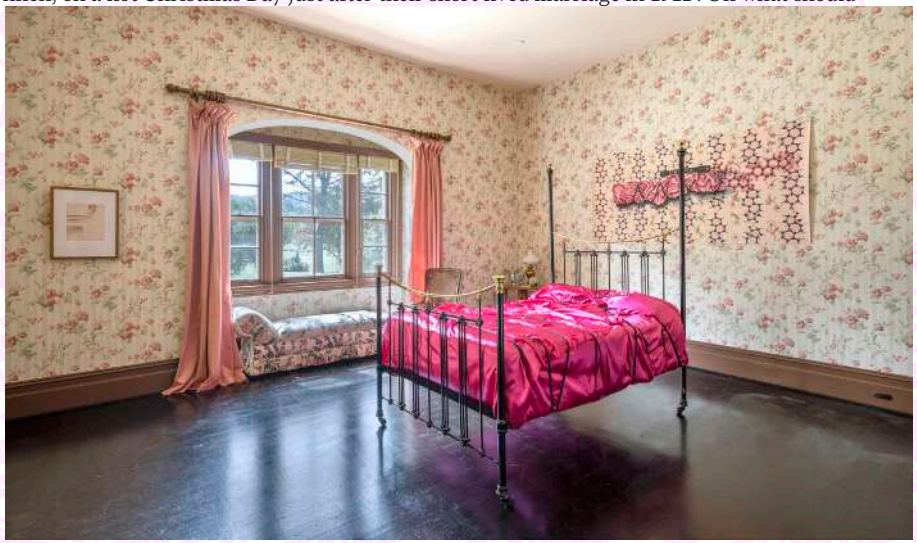

Figure 3: eX De Medici Pink for Boys Lanyon 2023 view to window with S Nolan Vase of Flowers 1945

have been a happy occasion for the couple, Louisa is notably downcast. Representing the real story of the circumstances of this marriage, which came at a time of limited choices for women without independent wealth, had been an unacknowledged part of the narrative presented on the history of the house. The interpretive materials had largely shown the lineage of families as comfortable, happy and prosperous, however this was not Louisa's private experience. During public programs for the installation, some long standing volunteers questioned the reading of this photograph and thought that the connection between the artwork and the historical context was too overt. The installation however was meant to provoke a re-reading of these narratives and to also highlight the serious widespread issue of domestic violence. Guns are an uncomfortable subject for many, but both de Medici and Nolan created art with open narratives that allowed the past to continue to speak to the contemporary.

Ultimately, both these projects have encouraged new and lively conversation about the museums' role as a place for difficult conversations and for contemporary practices to sit with the historical. They did not require extensive interpretive signage but rather visitors encountered these placements as relatively unsignalled which increased their potency. The creative insights of contemporary artists have offered much curatorial scope to bring these dialogues together.

Notes

1 https://nga.gov.au/knowmyname/artists/ex-de-medici/
2 https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/landing-info

Working with artists

Evolving Collections: The Experience of Inhabiting the City

Ethel Ramos

Biography

Ethel Ramos holds a Master's degree in Art History and a Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She completed a professional residency at MACBA (Spain, 2023) and a research residency at the Kunstmuseum Bonn (Germany, 2018). She has participated in national and international symposiums on art history and theory and her essays have been published in books and journals. Ramos has worked as a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Autonomous University of Mexico City. From 2021 to 2024, Ramos was Curator of the Banco de México Museum, where she is currently Head of Exhibitions.

The Museo Banco de México was inaugurated in 2021, and since then, its areas of interest revolve around three fundamental pillars: the central bank's functions, the numismatic and cultural collection, and the main building with an eclectic architectural style. These themes are explored through permanent and temporary exhibitions.

Additionally, activities are organized to strengthen the social cohesion of our community, such as the celebration of the museum's anniversary, dialogues with guest experts from several fields, and Sunday workshops which enhance the visitor experience. From Museo Banco de México's inception, we have prioritized establishing a dialogue with society and, one example includes creating a connection with the adjacent public space.We have also sought to build a living museum through outdoor activities or those within the institution that connect with the city, making the public space a protagonist of our sociocultural history. The construction of memories revolves around it, giving it its own voice, telling its story through its traces and dynamics.

The Museo Banco de México location is key, in the heart of one of the world's biggest cities, it coexists with iconic buildings and tourist attractions that draw diverse audiences. It is located on the corner of 5 de Mayo Street and Eje Central Avenue. Behind it is the Museo del Palacio Postal (Post Office Museum), and across Eje Central is the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes (Museum of Fine Arts). The intersection of these buildings creates a portrait of pre-revolutionary Mexico with its art nouveau and neoclassical facades and an interior built after the Revolution, in an art deco style, reflecting the paradigm shift the country was experiencing at that time. Across from the museum, on 5 de Mayo Street, is the Casa de los Azulejos, an iconic sixteenth-century building clad in blue tiles. Since the nineteenth century, it has been a restaurant frequented by prominent figures in history, including the revolutionary leaders of the early twentieth century.

The Museo de Banco de México integrates itself into the daily dynamics of traffic, commerce, encounters, and strolls that occur in the urban space. For example, artistic activations by collaborators have been carried out, such as the intervention by artist Federico Martínez Montoya in 2022, who created the piece *Águila o sol. Tianguis la Raza*, for the exhibition *Markets from the Perspective of Contemporary Art*. "Águila o sol" is a colloquial Mexican expression for "heads or tails" when you gamble with coin flips. In this piece, the artist went to a nearby street market, where he sold a silver coin to an antiquarian, and with the money, he began flipping coins with people he found in the market's streets, which was recorded on video.

Simultaneously, in the museum, we tracked the flips in real-time on a scaled map of the market, thus constructing a sort of cartography of gains and losses. In this piece the artist established an intriguing connection between the wandering of merchandise, the local currency and La raza market. At the same time, Federico Martínez Montoya interacted with the people of the place, building ephemeral relationships that involved expectations and illusions, reflecting our social dynamics in the urban environment.

In the same exhibition, we feature the *Mexico City Street Markets Project* (2018) by the urbanist Joseph Heatcott, whose panoramic photographs capture the urban layout of Mexico City. His images highlight the roofs of street market stalls that weave through the streets of several neighborhoods which make up the metropolis. Through color, we observe the length and distribution of the spaces that shoppers navigate on their routes, as if the image were a data graph.

The practice of strolling through the city has its origins in the nineteenth century in Paris, where the flâneur, the man who wandered the streets capturing his impressions of the city, entered the collective modern imagination. This is inspired in 1963 by Charles Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* , in which the flâneur takes mental pictures of the city life through his urban routes of transit, later transcribing them onto paper (2005). In the early twentieth century, Walter Benjamin revisited this figure and, drawing from Baudelaire's texts, analyzed the features of the flâneur. He noted that this character functioned under the logic of converting the modern individual into an agent of commerce (2005). This assertion was based on the argument that the flâneur, being a figure of transit, moved alongside goods, becoming one of them.

In the 1960s, the social needs demanded by art led to practices that were not aligned with the traditional museum, bringing art into the streets and displacing it as the exclusive and hegemonic space of art. An example of this is the work of artist Ben Vautier, who took to the streets of Nice with posters containing poetic and challenging phrases, encouraging interaction with passersby. As mentioned by Oriol Fondevilla (2018), in response to this street art focus, a new concept of the museum emerged, where mediating figures, such as the curator, became translators of ideas and concepts not grounded in the materiality of art and objects from the past.

The museum has had several transformations, required by the changes in social life, including its relationship with public space and the experience of the city, rethinking how collections, exhibitions, and public engagements are constructed, both inside and outside these spaces. In this sense, the reconfiguration of the museum needed an understanding of its own identity, carrying out situated practices, and connecting with its visitors to enable the construction of plural and lasting communities. An example of how the museum has connected with the city is through the exhibition, *Coyolxauhqui Worldview*. This exhibition revisited the figure of the Mexica lunar goddess, whose sculpture was discovered in the historic downtown of Mexico City, 47 years ago. This discovery led to the unearthing of the Templo Mayor, the most important religious temple of the Mexica empire, which until then was only known through written records. It was in 1978 that the Bank of Mexico and Mint began the design projects for the issuance of money with the image of Coyolxauhqui, which led to a banknote and a coin that circulated for eleven years.

To understand the symbolism this figure acquired in the exhibition, it is crucial to delve into the myth that tells her story, which places us before an allegory of the continuous emergence of day and night, representing the encounter of interdependent forces. According to this myth,

the pregnancy of a goddess sparked the struggle between two siblings. Coatlicue, mother of Coyolxauhqui and her warrior siblings, found a bird's feather on the hill of Coatepec. She placed it in her womb and when she looked for it again, the feather had disappeared, and she began to gestate a new life. Coyolxauhqui confronted the child that her mother had given birth to, a warrior named Huitzilopochtli, who fought against his sister until he threw her down the slope of Coatepec. From this myth emerges the form of Coyolxauhqui as we know her today: hurled down from the height of a hill, presented with a fragmented body, adorned with feathers, and symbolic elements of life and death.

Coyolxauhqui, both goddess and warrior, embodies the concept of duality. In the dichotomy that her figure represents, she is shown with a dismembered body arranged in a circular form, where beginning and end exist nowhere and everywhere at once, forming a unity. This relationship generates a creative force that allows a continuous connection between fragmentation and reconstruction.

To address this duality in the exhibition, the concept of the *Coyolxauhqui Imperative* by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), a Chicana writer, was revisited, which she described as an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing. Under this term, the lunar goddess symbolizes the transformation of crisis, wounds and traumas into means of attaining healing and wholeness, as Anzaldúa indicated, the moon's light becomes medicine and a guide.

The Museum's curatorial team worked closely with this text, inviting five female artists to create specific works inspired by Anzaldúa's writings. They collaborated for a year, meeting to share opinions and understand each artist's perspective within their work. Additionally, other invited artists' pieces engaged in dialogue with the curatorship, creating reverberations of the past in the present, establishing bridges for the reinterpretation of both personal and collective histories.

Within the exhibition, constellations were constructed to reflect events that took place between 1978 and 1994. These constellations establish connections between the elements that shaped the collective memory of that era, and show us that it still remains as part of Mexican society. The social, political, and economic events of that time have transformed our present, where we can still feel the nostalgia awakened by the images, which serve as testimonies of another time, and the objects that preserve the past.

These constellations were formed by images alluding to historical events, numismatic pieces, and everyday objects lent by central bank workers. In doing so, the museum recognized the potential for everyone to be active agents in the preservation of memory and the safeguarding of items that gain value over time.

Furthermore, the exhibition conveyed a key message that connected the city to the Coyolxauhqui Imperative: when the city collapsed, fragmenting like the lunar goddess, it underwent a healing process through civil unity and mutual aid. The city witnessed these events, its streets were transformed into the surface of an empire, with the discovery of the Templo Mayor; into a public celebration, during the World Cup; and moreover, into a space of fracture and reconstruction, with the earthquake of 1985.

Overall, The *Coyolxauhqui Worldview* at the Museo Banco de México addresses the mechanisms of transformation and resilience in contemporary life as collective processes and reflections of identity. They are often manifested in public spaces, where we see and we are seen, recognizing ourselves as part of a collective entity.

In the same way, the exhibitions, events, and collaborations mentioned in this text exemplify how the Museo Banco de México conceives its relationship with the city and its inhabitants. The streets and avenues we walk through daily are closely linked to the construction of our memory, giving rise to archives and collections that are activated through the exhibitions and public programs held at the Museum. Our intention is to create an open and inclusive space that seeks to empower individuals and society, through meaningful and enduring connections.

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