



¹Matthew Connell: Curator

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Matthew Connell's creative practice ranges from building collections of unique and resonant artefacts to creating innovative exhibitions that transform public museum experience. From such work, stories emerge that open new windows into old worlds and make connections with present and future aspects of human lives. An important element of Matthew's thinking is how in the contemporary museum context, new theories and forms of knowledge are created and how different disciplines feed into that process. He shares a strong interest with Ken Arnold in inter-disciplinary thinking but with a caution that being inter-disciplinary is founded on a disciplinary bedrock: The exhibition 'Out of Hand' which he curated, exemplified his commitment to bridging disciplines in its exploration of the interplay between materials, technologies and processes through the work of outstanding practitioners connected across time and place². Reflective practice for Matthew is an evolving process of exploration and experimentation. Reflection as an integral way of working has developed over his professional curatorial career: as he says: *Reflective practice is helped by time*. However, reflecting solo is not the norm in contemporary curatorial work where collaboration is essential for success. Working as part of in-house teams demands a great deal of reflection through dialogue and communication in a constant search for new ideas and exciting connections. Exploring what others do and how they do it is a fundamental part of Matthew's co-reflective practice. Thinking with others is based upon various types of dialogue: informal conversations, formal speeches with feedback, exchanges about ideas and expertise. Encounters at all levels of his own organization and outside it too, provide vital opportunities for trying out ideas and gaining understanding from many sources and disciplines.

As he explains in his interview below, collaboration for him implies listening and learning from each other.

Interview

Q: What is your view about curating as a practice?

M: Firstly, this museum has a particular approach to curatorship. We are collecting curators so we are the people who make decisions about what will be acquired into the permanent collection of the museum. Also, we are the people who propose exhibition subjects and develop the content in conjunction with a project team to then design those exhibitions. So, we are exhibition curators and collection curators. We are also expected to write within our subject area and form appropriate networks within the expertise associated with our fields... I took the view that in relation to the collection we were really more like knowledge brokers around our collections and within the subject areas where we had expertise. In fact, there was more than one way of interpreting and understanding and assigning meaning to the things we had.

Q: What kind of curator are you?

M: What kind of curator? I'm an old curator! Experienced is a term I might choose for myself. More recently, and I think it's a continuation of the impact of information technologies, there's been a move towards inter-disciplinarity and cross-disciplinary practice. A lot of it started with changes to the way the research was understood - the move away from discipline based research to inter-disciplinary research and cross-disciplinary research which I think has some fantastic aspects to it. Like all changes we love to rush over to the other side of the boat from time to time. I'm very interested in inter-disciplinary knowledge creation but I also, possibly as a reflection of my engagement with knowledge structures, I can see the museum as one of the institutions like universities is where legitimate knowledge is defined. I do see the curatorial role as being an epistemological role: we are engaged in it at a high level.

I am very interested in new practices, in innovation across the board. I'm interested in the fact that innovation often occurs in the new connections that are made in existing areas of knowledge. But I am also aware that inter-disciplinarity doesn't mean anything if you don't have disciplines. People sometimes forget that you need strong

disciplines to have inter-disciplinary anything. Disciplines of course do change but they emerge for reason and those reasons shouldn't be forgotten.

It is an interesting point that people come in and say we have to rethink the purpose of the museum and one of the things that people say is "we are an agent for social change." I always put up my hand and say "sometimes we are an agent for social change but sometimes we are an agent for social stability." It depends on what is required at the time because not every occasion calls for a change and sometimes our job is to resist change or remind people of the implicit values, those taken for granted, that might be under threat.

Q: How much scope do you have for being creative?

M: I feel I have a lot of scope to be creative...one of the things we do here is we write a collection policy that demonstrates that we are going to collect in a way that is rationally determined and free of bias or subjective which is not possible. If you go back and look at our collections, and the objects we collect are meant to reflect the values, views and beliefs of the cultures used to produce them- that's the basis of our practice, that's why we collect and that in some way those values and beliefs can be viewed in those artefacts. There's another side to that and that is that the values and beliefs of the person who collected are also very evident in the collections. As a curator, I feel it is my job not just to sample: we sample history- there's no other way of doing history, of collecting everything so we take bits and we invariably create some stories. My view as a curator is not to manipulate that to our own advantage; we do acquire this material as primary source material that gives you a window into the past. We can't avoid bringing in our personal biases into our collecting so we should acknowledge that and be conscious how easy it is to a story, to collect with a confirmation bias.

My role is to make the selection...I am trying to represent, not just technology, but events and cultural currents that are in place. But I am also attempting to imagine what is going to be of interest and concern to people in the future. So, we have two roles: one is to look at things that exist and would be great to have because everyone agrees that these are great windows into the past but it's also to acquire things that are available now that are going to represent who and what we are now to future generations before they disappear completely.

To me the creative element is in building a collection...The other thing is that if I collect something, that will lead me to collect something else. Just as when I take the artefacts and put them together in an exhibition such that they tell a story, I collect along that way too. As I collect the artefacts speak to me and start to represent things and then I find myself looking for the other pieces that go with it. I don't see an artefact and go 'how does that fit?' ... I look at how it fits into a story, how it fits into our policy but I also identify stories that I feel are emerging.

Q: Is that what happened with the 'Out of Hand' show?

M: Yes. We developed a new iteration with the advice of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York in 2013 who did the original exhibition curated by Senior Curator Ron Labaco. I changed it to reflect our geography - where we are in the world; I changed it to reflect the story of our institution or our message which, because of its longevity which is represented through its collection, I believe there are longer term stories in stories of innovation that are important to understanding innovation. I have a particular view that the very term innovation is so over-used that it is almost rendered meaningless. Successive governments here have claimed a commitment to an innovation economy, but I think they rarely do that, they usually don't support anything that's really innovative. For me, innovation and creativity arise from a cultural bed. You create conditions where that happens: our job is to help create those conditions, to help create a culture, a sustained culture where the conditions of innovation are always in place...

Q: When you start on a project, where does that come from usually?

M: I carry ideas all the time and it spills right outside of my work hours. It comes from my reading and from my conversations and from my networks. It's really important for me to go to the edges of my fields of interest. Ideas come to me from the collection, from what is in the ether in various other media, from conversations with colleagues, with visitors, from other museums. A lot of the ideas come directly from conversations with other people. For the practice itself, I get an enormous amount of excitement. What happens if I do an exhibition is I have an idea, I have a way I want to go but I never see it all. Something new is revealed every time. Every time I do an exhibition I get surprises, new things come up.

Q: Can you think of an example where a surprise makes it turn in a different direction?

M: I did an exhibition once about a guy called William Stanley Jevons³ who I was following because I had acquired a piece of Charles Babbage's Difference Engine at auction for the Museum and then attended to the publicity that went with spending so much money. I was also reading and learning a lot about Babbage and telling everyone else about him and uncovering things he had done. Fortunately, he had done lots of things and everything he's done seemed to have a resonance with things happening in the world today.

Flush with the success of that, I started mining the 19th century for precursor computing ideas and inventions. I learned about a machine called a logic piano designed by a guy called William Stanley Jevons. I went, 'A logic piano sounds great! Who could resist that?' I just knew enough about computers being logical machines to know that it was an area to explore. I knew that symbolic logic had had its origins in the 19th century. I found this guy Jevons had built this logic inference machine and that it still existed at the Oxford Museum of the History of Science. I then was reading about logical machines and diagrams. I read that William Stanley Jevons travelled to Sydney and discovered that he had been an assayer at the Sydney Mint. He'd come as a nineteen year old to work at the Sydney Mint. He was already a polymath who had the scientific gaze that he cast his scientific gaze upon everything that he saw and not just Nature. He looked at the rocks, he looked at the vegetation, he also looked at society. He was a very early social scientist. He built himself a cloud chamber⁴ at the Mint in his spare time and did the meteorology for Sydney. He had also become interested in economics and he decided in his time here to start thinking about economics from a mathematical perspective. He read a paper by Dionysius Lardener where he had proposed a mathematical formula to understand an economic idea in relation to the railways. He re-formulated the notion of value in economics which was already a problem in classical economics from a mathematical perspective based on some analogical thinking that he did from working with the instruments at the Mint. His work now underpins neo-classical economics and Sydney was his laboratory ... he saw Sydney awash with gold from the gold rush, people starting to exchange pieces of rock. That's why they decided to build a mint. He rethought economics into the way we understand it today.

That's a case where I'm following one thing and I uncover another thing when I realise that this man sat at the conception of a number of the most important discourses of our time.

Then I started thinking well how do they all work together? How do they intertwine? And then I bumped into a friend at Market City. I was going for some noodles and saw an old friend who was walking and scratching head and as it turned out thinking about Jevons whose photography he loved. I didn't know Jevons was a photographer, an amateur photographer. I then started talking with Lindsey Barrett, the friend and colleague who I had been at UTS with. He didn't know that Jevons had been a logician and we started to talk and we ended up doing an exhibition called *William Jevons: The Curious Economist*.

Every bit of research we did, we discovered something. We were reflecting the whole time. And there was serendipity too. People talk about this idea when you are researching then stuff turns up but bumping into Lindsey was ridiculous! He was interested in economics and photography and Jevons tied the two together. I was interested in logic and as it turned out I was interested in mathematics and economics. Then we found Jevons photographs and his diaries. They were here but they had been repatriated and were held in Manchester at the John Rylands Library⁵. The photographs were sent by letters from Jevons to his sisters and the entry in the diaries relate to the photos. The photographs became a narrative already: they were incredible photographs because he wasn't a professional photographer so they had this unbelievable domestic and personal quality to them. I wasn't a great reader of photography before this came along and Jevons photos taught me to read photographs and drew me into the history of Australian photography which I knew nothing about prior to that. Now I am completely captivated by it. We had a personal photographic story and we were able to represent the areas Jevons worked in.

Q: Can you say what reflection amounts to in relation to your creative practice?

M: Thinking in the moment is where ideas arise or crystallise but I do a lot of reading and talking and reflecting on what we have done, what works, what I would do again, what I would do differently. New technologies, new audience expectations, new administrative environments, new cultural priorities all have their impact on what we do over time. I try to be conscious of what is happening around me or at least check in from time to time. I like to experiment, I like to work with people from outside curatorial, outside the museum. I like to look at what other curators and museums do. I work with a lot of other professionals especially academics and I like understanding the different approaches we have to the same subjects, issues and concerns. I think a lot about how exhibitions work as a communications medium and that the craft of the curator is to better understand that

medium. I look for things that work well especially unexpected things. I look for little success to carry through to another exhibition – iterate. I look for clichés in form and content. (to draw from my lexicon) I also try to stop and look at how successive projects work together over time and how collection development and research and exhibitions work together across the museum. I do some writing and a quite a bit of speaking about curatorship which gives me the opportunity to reflect upon what I/we do. I speak to a lot of students who make me think. I have also had the benefit of having been a curator for a long time. Reflective practice is helped by time.

Q: What kind of collaborations are you engaged in?

M: There are different ways in which curators approach their task and with the exhibition stuff where it is delivering the material in a particular medium. I think of the exhibition as a particular medium and it is one I think about a lot. For me collaboration really important because I don't think with a blank piece of paper, I think when I am talking to somebody else. I have a close group of friends I talk with a lot but any exhibition takes me into other areas. From an ideas' perspective, I really have to talk out loud. There are the people I work with here: they are not all curators. They're 'sounding board' people who I have spoken with over long periods of time who either validate or not the things I am saying and are excited by the same things but also have other areas of attached connections.

I am interested in ideas; they arise out of conversations and I don't care who delivers the idea. I like everyone to engage in the story we are telling and how we might tell it. It's not that there is no hierarchy. The best ideas come when everyone feels they have a say and we get to agree on what works best.

Q: Do the people you work with challenge you?

M: Yes, they challenge me and sometimes they challenge me just over design issues which is why I insist they engage with the content. I work very closely with editors when I'm writing and we have great editors here and they're talented writers- and they definitely challenge. I like to work closely with the editors, to work out how the whole of the text works and reads and not just that the grammar's correct... I like to run through my ideas to the whole project team. One because I like to hear what the responses to my ideas are and if you create the right environment where people feel comfortable to speak up, they start talking and laughing and putting stuff in. There are people who like working on my exhibitions because they like to muck in- they're not being told to go and do the stuff. I sometimes have difficulties because people become attached to their contribution. There are always more ideas than we can use and if I'm the lead curator I have to make some final calls. People can get cranky. It's still a social situation.

Q: Do you want your team to be as creative as you are?

M: I like to think so. To acknowledge people and to give them opportunities. We work in a big museum, we have a big team, there are assistant curators, designers, graphic designers, writers, marketing specialists, registrars who look after objects, conservators, technicians. They are all bright people; the museum attracts such people. They might have very technical skills but nearly everyone is interested in bigger ideas. That's probably why they signed up in the first place. The exhibitions work when people bring their particular skills to bear on an idea that they like. Sometimes we work with curatorial teams and curators take responsibility for different sections: that can be fine but it is really important at some point that someone steps back and checks that the exhibition works as a whole. Team need to be teams...

Q: Do you stand your ground when you think it is important enough?

M: Yes. You have to stand your ground but you also have to be realistic and you have to pick your battles. You also have to be clear and articulate as to why. What I have to do is actually question myself. At the beginning, it is very easy to be precious about getting everything in. I had a few crises around works we couldn't get because they became so valuable the insurance requirements by the lenders were just too much for our insurance company. I did trade-off and all the time I was holding the ground... I think I was just very keen to get the works and tried every avenue but couldn't because of cost

¹ Photo: Ryan Hernandez. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

² Connell (2016): see interview <https://maas.museum/inside-the-collection/2016/09/21/an-interview-with-matthew-connell-curator-of-out-of-hand-materialising-the-digital-exhibition/>

³ William Stanley Jevons FRS 1835 – 1882) English economist and logician worked in Sydney as an Assayer at the Mint. See Barrett and Connell (2006): <http://www.rutherfordjournal.org/article010103.html>

⁴ A Cloud Chamber is a device used to detect ionizing particles and to determine their trajectories.

⁵ <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/>