

## Chasing at shadows – ‘my museum question’

“ ... the museum [is] a benign philosophical space to explore taboo ideas and challenging representations”

– Caleb Williams, Head Curator, Justice and Police Museum, Sydney

“The truly tolerant have no defence against intolerance. I surrender. To the Zionists I say: you win. To the Palestinians: forgive my cowardice.”

– Terry Lane, broadcaster and newspaper columnist

In the 1980s, while working for ABC Radio in Melbourne, journalist Terry Lane announced that he would no longer publicly discuss Israel and the Middle East. Despite having been a strong supporter of Israel, Lane became a target of Jewish nationalists when he began to question the actions of the Israeli state. “The Zionist lobby, he wrote, were ‘malicious, implacable, mendacious and dangerous’. He expressed dismay that as soon as the expression ‘anti-Semite’ is uttered, ‘or, heaven forbid, the sacred formula ‘six million’ ... then I know from bitter experience that there is not one manager or editor in the country who will defend an underling. We are thrown to the jackals”<sup>i</sup>

Robert Manne, also a past supporter of Israel, suggests that even to enter the argument is to pay a price. “The fact that there is so little interesting debate here means that they [the Zionist lobby] are achieving their aims [by intimidating dissenters]”<sup>ii</sup> As a former editor at Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum, witness to behind-the-scenes lobbying and censorship of the *Treasures of Palestine* exhibition in 2003, I know what Manne is talking about.

Antony Loewenstein was motivated to write *My Israel Question* by the Hanan Ashrawi affair, which he says changed his life.\* “The saga of the 2003 Sydney Peace Prize ... represented the start of a journey into personal controversy, which led me to question the way the debate about Israel is presented in Australia, and ultimately to write this book”<sup>iii</sup> Loewenstein examines the ways in which the Zionist lobby’s influence has succeeded in erasing the Palestinian narrative from public dialogue in Australia.

*My Israel Question* intersects with *my museum question* in two ways. By 2003 I had become increasingly critical of the ethics and direction of a profession to which I had devoted 14 years of my life. What for myself, and for many of my colleagues, had been a vocation that offered in satisfaction what it lacked in remuneration had become an industry controlled by ambitious bureaucrats. Museums, once a place of contemplation and education, were morphing into banal leisure precincts, their social worth focus-grouped into oblivion. The other point of connection is the alarming picture Loewenstein paints “of elite individuals with direct access to the corridors of power”<sup>iv</sup>

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\* The Zionist lobby campaigned hard to prevent Palestinian scholar and activist Hanan Ashrawi from being awarded the Sydney Peace Prize in 2003. They succeeded in having the City of Sydney withdraw its sponsorship; the ceremony, which was to have been held at Sydney Town Hall, was shifted to Sydney University’s Great Hall, but this venue too became ‘unavailable’ as Vice Chancellor Kim Santow succumbed to the lobbyists. The story made news around the world and is detailed in Chapter One of *My Israel Question*.

In August 1995, a member of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies rewrote the introduction to a display of Palestinian women's costume at the Powerhouse Museum and confidently faxed it to Jana Vytrhlik, the museum's head of Education, signing off "All the best, see you soon". The museum, then under the directorship of Terence Measham, didn't accept the changes and that was the end of the matter. Kevin Fewster took over in 2000. In addition to bringing NSW museumgoers exhibitions of the calibre of *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*, one of the achievements of which Fewster claims to be most proud was the 'book-on-walls' show *Anne Frank + Courage to Care* (developed by the Jewish organisation B'nai B'rith).

In 2002, the Powerhouse – a NSW government institution – sent this exhibition to the Queensland Museum. The cost for print materials alone was \$3210; the money came from the museum's 'regional programs' budget. My query, when instructed to produce the print package, as to how Brisbane qualified as a region of NSW, was ignored by my boss. Exhibitions Manager Brad Baker was more naïve; openly stating at a team meeting that the rationale for touring the show to Brisbane was that Queensland was the only state in which B'nai B'rith did not have a presence. Fewster, and his wife Carol Scott, head of Evaluation and Audience Research, had by now cultivated powerful friends in Sydney's Zionist community.

In 2001 Ali Kazak, Australia's Palestinian delegate, met with Powerhouse Deputy Director Jennifer Sanders about exhibiting his collection of Palestinian paintings, posters, photographs and crafts at the museum. *Treasures of Palestine* was as welcome as an auditor at Enron, but with funding from the Ministry of the Arts, the Community Relations Commission and the Premier's Department management had no choice but to accept the show. In an unusual interpretation of the museum's commitment to "fostering community partnerships", a select group of Zionist "mates" (as they were later dubbed by a middle manager closely involved in the censorship) was given *carte blanche* to determine the content of an exhibition they opposed.

In August 2003 Powerhouse curator Paul Donnelly and project officer Alissar Chidiac submitted a detailed exhibition proposal. The main aim was that "The visitor should feel that they are witnessing an unfamiliar side to the representation of Palestine that humanises the people, history and politics and often biased media coverage". The materials were to be explored "through a Palestinian perspective" with maps and videos providing context.

Management denied Chidiac's request for a broad-based community consultative committee to assist with exhibition development. Established procedures for dealing with sensitive political and cultural content were abandoned. The Australian Arabic Communities Council was not consulted. Unexplained delays and un-attributed copy changes delayed production of promotional materials. Although the *Australian Jewish News (AJN)* was involved from an early stage, a media release was not issued to the Arabic press until the day before the opening.

One can only surmise – and many did – that management, through stalling, interfering and creating one obstacle after another, had hoped to push Kazak into such an untenable position that he would refuse to sign the exhibition agreement and thus provide the museum with an excuse to cancel the show. If proof of this suspicion was needed, it came when the Deputy Director attended a team meeting and announced that, “the exhibition is going ahead”, forgetting that management had never suggested otherwise. In fact, she had previously accused those raising concerns of “chasing at shadows”. They were some pretty powerful shadows. Gabby Levy, Israel’s Ambassador to Australia visited the museum early in the morning of 7 October, a visit denied by management but recorded in the security gatehouse logbook for the day. Others consulted in the development of this Palestinian community exhibition included Australia’s Ambassador to Israel, NSW Jewish Board of Deputies President Stephen Rothman, prominent Zionist Alan Gold and anti-Ashrawi campaigner Peter Wertheim.

Leaked minutes of a meeting held in Fewster’s office (attended by Carol Scott but not by either of the curators) are revealing. Listed under issues to be actioned: “Kevin Fewster to forward all theme panels, labels and object list for external advice on 22.9.03” This was *before* the final object selection was made, not *after* as he later alleged when questioned by the media about improper outside influence. The Community Relations section of the minutes included the extraordinary directive: “Meetings with key community groups, eg *Jewish News* [my emphasis] need to be set up”. Concurrent with this courting of hostile forces, the curators were forbidden to speak to Ali Kazak who was described by management as “a lone individual” with an axe to grind.

Tony Cutcliffe, director of the independent think tank the Eureka Project, analysing the Ashrawi affair, could equally have been talking about the situation at the Powerhouse when he argued, “The Palestinian people represented in Australia do not have the resources to be influential in the funding of political campaigns. Nor are they lucrative clients of law firms, banks and other big business. Nor do they have a voice ... As a consequence, one half of the Middle East conflict remains unrepresented, and any clinical assessment of Israeli politics immediately becomes politically incorrect.”<sup>v</sup>

Ultimately, 45 of the original 50 photographs were cut, all images of Israeli soldiers (including UN relief agency photographs) were culled, and of three documentaries only one, about embroidery, was shown. The final exhibition text was vague to the point of absurdity and the original storyline rendered incomprehensible through the deletion of key objects. Original design drawings included all the items detailed in the August exhibition proposal, discrediting Fewster’s vehement assertion to the ABC’s *Lateline* program (18.11.03) that cuts were only made due to ‘lack of space’.\*

In contrast to Stephen Rothman’s fine way with words (he carefully told *Lateline* “We were shown exactly what was in the end part of the exhibition”), Fewster forgot to

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\* After the final object deletions had been decided, the exhibition designers were told to produce new drawings. A large annex adjoining the gallery was sealed off with a false wall and remained empty for the duration of the show. A long corridor leading to the exhibition was festooned with decorative graphics and the collection of historical Palestinian posters that was to have hung in this space remained in the basement.

mention the space constraints of “Australia’s largest museum” when interviewed by the *AJN*, merely assuring them that *Treasures of Palestine* was “free of propaganda”. In an opportunity denied Powerhouse visitors, readers can decide for themselves where the propaganda lies. Below is the opening sentence of the original introduction to the show:

*Palestinians and Jews have lived in the land now known as Israel for centuries. In 1948, with the creation of Israel as a Jewish state, many Palestinians became refugees exiled from their own homes.*

This is what was displayed:

*Beauty is all the more satisfying when its fragility is appreciated. Rich traditions of arts and crafts sprout like flowers in a land torn by unrest.*

When *Treasures of Palestine* was exhibited five months earlier at the Canberra Museum and Gallery, it included dozens of photographs and posters and a documentary on the Intifada. Director Peter Haynes had been pressured by lobbyists to remove photographs and documents from the exhibition, but refused, as did Tim Flannery when the show travelled to the South Australian Museum in 2004, proving that arguments are not necessarily won or lost on merit but rather on the power of lobbyists and the integrity of those being lobbied. Although concern was expressed behind the scenes, only three Powerhouse staff, I was one, openly protested to management about the influence of external stakeholders.

Details of the censorship were initially leaked to *The 7.30 Report*, but their reporter reluctantly dropped the story, unwilling to submit to his producer’s proviso that “equal time” must be given to “the other side” – that is, to the Board of Deputies. The reporter argued that the Board already monopolised public space to an unfair degree and he was simply not prepared to give them more airtime. Thus a newsworthy Palestinian story was abandoned because the outcome, however unintended, would have been further promotion of the Zionist cause. Although the ABC does not contend that ‘balance’ must occur within a show but rather across the spectrum of programming, when it comes to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, accepted standards of fairness are often jettisoned.

Loewenstein’s book goes a long way to revealing the root causes of such self-censorship. In ‘Public Broadcasters Under Fire’, he details how since 2002 both the ABC and SBS have been under sustained attack over their reporting of Israel-Palestine. Former SBS news and current affairs producer Nigel McCarthy argues that many complainants “deliberately disregard the realities of journalism ... Events are reported as they are still unfolding, often before a full explanation is available or before comment is available from all the relevant parties. Attempts to create editorial guidelines that restrict journalists because of considerations such as those play into the hands of complainants and need to be resisted”.<sup>vi</sup> But public broadcasters don’t have the resources to be continually tied up responding to orchestrated campaigns, and the lobbyists know this. As a result, and here Loewenstein quotes Joan Didion in support, “Fairness has often come

to mean a scrupulous passivity, an agreement to cover the story, not as it is occurring but as it is presented, which is to say, as it is manufactured".<sup>vii</sup>

But museums are not bound by news cycles; they have the gift of hindsight and the luxury of time. Cultural institutions can draw on considered argument and established fact. And they can present this information in a way that opens up public discussion. In short, they are a safe space for debate. At least this is what their self-appointed spokespeople constantly tell us. The conclusion that one is supposed to draw from the mini-industry of seminars, conferences and academic papers that has coalesced around museums over the past dozen or so years is that museums are worthy, democratic and *necessary* institutions.

Even today, when financial irregularities, nepotism and conflicts of interest in cultural institutions are regularly concealed from the public, former Australian Museum director, Des Griffin insists that, "The arts and museums and galleries ... demonstrate a degree of accountability and transparency that the NSW Treasurer Michael Costa and his colleagues would never accept."<sup>viii</sup> When benchmarks of transparency are measured by the standards of organisations such as the Powerhouse, we are in deep trouble. As for accountability, the Hansard transcripts of Estimates Committee hearings dealing with the censorship at the Powerhouse make depressing reading. Although clearly exasperated with having to answer to Fewster's bumbling contradictions neither Roger Wilkins (then Director General of the Cabinet Office) nor Col Gellatly (Head of the Premier's Department) provided satisfactory responses to the serious and detailed allegations of impropriety that were put to them.

Respected US museum commentator and consultant Elaine Heumann Gurian said in her keynote address at the annual Museums Australia conference, 'Power and Empowerment', in Sydney in 1996, "Civic institutions can aspire to become one of the community's few safe and neutral congregant spaces". Carol Scott, then Evaluation and Visitor Research Coordinator at the Powerhouse Museum and local aspirant to the Gurian mantle, gave a paper at the 'Politics of Empowerment' session headed 'Exhibiting Controversy: Stakeholders, Power and Politics' in which she asked, "What are the limits of external influence? What autonomy does a museum have to determine its program and the type of interpretation it chooses?" A question she could have answered with great specificity in October 2003.

Arts professionals love a rhetorical question. Maybe that's why Powerhouse Museum management ignored me back in that dark October when I asked them "what are the mutual rights and obligations of staff and management in mounting exhibitions that make a worthwhile contribution to community debate?" Aside from bathing in the warm waters of empowerment (their own), what else does the museum community love? Well, 'relevance' definitely, and 'contest' is always good in that it suggests just enough allusion to the outside world but not so much that one actually has to participate in it.

Coincidentally, a perfect opportunity to discuss relevant issues presented itself ten days after the *Lateline* exposé with the University of Sydney symposium, 'Contest and

Contemporary Society: Redefining Museums in the 21st Century'. Denied official permission to attend (my potential contribution threatened to be a little too pertinent), I went in my own time but was nevertheless forbidden to speak. A group of protestors from the Arab Australian Arts Action Alliance gathered at the seminar entrance distributing postcards depicting one of the photographs culled from *Treasures*. Seminar organisers must have been delighted with this serendipitous timing – their event was *genuinely* relevant. So what happened inside?

If you've read this far, I think you know the answer. After various pleasantries about reframing museums as civic spaces and discussion of the role of museums "in a climate of contestation" (not the one outside though), someone, and it was only a lowly audience member, finally mentioned the elephant in the room, 'Isn't there some irony here given what's going on outside?' The ubiquitous Carol Scott, having actively engaged in silencing the Palestinians, now literally jumped out of her seat to misrepresent the Jewish community. After (falsely) alleging that most comments received by the museum were positive, she used a forum on free speech to claim that the majority of negative comments received by the Powerhouse were "mostly from Jews" who said, "how dare you put on anything about Palestine?"

I saw every one of 34 complaints sent to the museum's website in the five days following the *Lateline* program, all objected to the censorship; at least six were from liberal Jews (from Haifa to Elwood) angered at being spoken for by the extreme right and about another half dozen were from academics. There was not one complaint from anyone associated with the museum profession. And not a *peep* from the Zionist lobby (surely an unprecedented occurrence and newsworthy in itself) – evidence of just how successful the censorship had been.

Loewenstein notes that, "The Ashrawi affair opened up fault lines in the Australian Jewish community, and in the space created, new voices were heard."<sup>ix</sup> This is a positive outcome from a shameful episode. The increased presence in the media of previously unheard voices is laudable and the recent establishment of Independent Australian Jewish Voices, to take one example, shows that Zionist narratives are beginning to be questioned in the mainstream. But post-*Treasures of Palestine* the arts community remains publicly united, in silence.

When I first read *My Israel Question*, I was surprised to find no mention of the censorship at the Powerhouse – despite its overlap and direct parallels with the Ashrawi controversy. But after re-reading the powerful and articulate arguments from journalists, producers and broadcasters exhausted by their constant battles with the Zionist lobby, I realised that there is simply no comparable body of comment from the museum industry. The public face of the cultural sector is full of easy self-congratulation, but radical platitudes rarely translate to action and when serious breaches of trust and accountability occur no one is willing to speak on the record.

Loewenstein is rightly proud of the Jewish tradition of dissent. Despite a history of persecution that goes back centuries, and continues today, growing numbers in the Jewish

community are displaying a capacity for public self-examination that puts tenured middle-class arts workers to shame. Dissent in museums is largely confined to corridor chat and flaccid seminars that only serve to highlight the increasing gulf between the notion of free speech and its practice in the art/museum space. While constantly professing its value to civil society, the arts industry refuses to engage in genuine self-criticism or in debate that threatens self-interest. Museums are not benign institutions, but many of their employees are certainly value-free.

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<sup>i</sup> Antony Loewenstein, *My Israel Question*, Melbourne University Press, 2006, p 220

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Manne, *ibid* p 249

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*, p 4

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*, *The Australian's* Elisabeth Wynhausen on the Ashrawi affair, p 17

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*, p 14

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid* p 204

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*, p 202

<sup>viii</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Letters to the Editor, 5.6.07

<sup>ix</sup> *op cit*, p 21