

The responsible use of memory in museums

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Eternity by Arthur Stance written in white chalk on cardboard painted with blackboard paint

As a curator at the National Museum of Australia, I have had the pleasure of working for the past two years on a gallery called *Eternity: stories from the emotional heart of Australia*.

This gallery presents unique challenges and rewards to the curator. In particular, the use of memory as a key device in the gallery carries a heavy responsibility, but one that can also be extremely rewarding.

Eternity uses ten emotive themes to explore Australian history through real people's lives, emotions and experiences. The themes are chance, thrill, separation, mystery, devotion, loneliness, passion, hope, fear and joy.

Five people are featured under each theme at any one time, and each person's story is presented through an image of the person, a personal object that relates to their story, and an electronic touchscreen.

The touchscreen uses direct quotes from the person to tell the story in their own words, is illustrated with photos and the story is further explored in a short film between 60 and 90 seconds long.



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A story currently featured in the gallery under Devotion is that of Jack Lamont. The Museum tells Jack's story of caring for Daphne, his wife of sixty years who suffers from advanced dementia. Jack cared for her for six years at home, but now she is in a nearby nursing home. He visits her several times a week, does all her washing and ironing and bakes cakes and muffins for all the residents and staff of the home.



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The story focuses on Jack's devotion both to his wife and to raising awareness of the effects of dementia. The object on display is the cake tin in which he carries the cakes and muffins he bakes to the nursing home.

These then, the objects, images and first-person quotes, are the tools we use to transmit memory from the private realm into the public.

When the Eternity exhibition was first being developed the lead curator Dr Marion Stell, asked herself whether the emotional response that people have when they view 'the real, authentic' object in a museum could be used to help the visitor make sense of history through an individual person's story.

In order to achieve this, the team that created Eternity rejected the predictable, familiar and rigid clumpings commonly used to tell social history – categories such as sport, the disabled, women and migration. They were inspired by Theodore Zeldin's book, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, which deals with the realm of people's real experiences. Zeldin wrote that,

"You will not find history laid out in these pages as it is in museums, with each empire and each period carefully separated. I am writing about what will not lie still, about the past which is alive in people's minds today".¹

In categorising events and people's experiences and achievements under one emotive theme, the Eternity gallery necessarily goes straight to the individual's memory of the event - the past which is alive in their mind.

Emotions are such powerful tools precisely because everybody has them. However, while others may experience the same emotion at the same time, an emotion is a deeply personal feeling that can never be exactly the same for another person. Therefore, to understand why the person felt that emotion we have to delve into their memory of the event.



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¹ Zeldin, Theodore. *An Intimate History of Humanity*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994, p.viii

In Eternity, we do this by telling the story in the person's own words, and through the selection of an object which links together the emotion and the event *for them*, not necessarily for us, the viewers. In order to be true to their memory, we use those things that encapsulate their memory: photos, objects and remembrance.

Of course, this approach has dangers. The leader of the federal opposition, the Hon. Dr Brendan Nelson, learned this during the government's historic apology to the Stolen Generations at the first sitting of Australia's 42nd Parliament on 13th February. For one thing, if you are using the memory of a living person, or where the close relatives and friends of a person can be affected by the telling of that memory, you must be especially careful to have their full agreement and support, not only for telling their story, but for how you tell it. Even when quoting their own words directly, as Dr Nelson discovered, the manner in which you select the words, and the context in which they are presented is important to make sure they are not misinterpreted.

In his historic Parliamentary motion, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd walked this tightrope with aplomb. He carefully chose the person whose story he would tell in order to represent a broader experience in Australian history. He asked her permission, he listened to her story and, most importantly, he asked her what "of *her story* she wanted told". He commented that,

"There is something terribly primal about these first-hand accounts, the pain is searing, it screams from the pages, the hurt the humiliation, the degradation and the sheer brutality of the act of physically separating a mother from her children is a deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity".²

This is what the curators at the NMA try to harness every time they tell a story in the Eternity gallery. And that is why, when we are dealing with a contemporary person, we are so careful about consulting with either the individual or the relevant community about whether we will tell their story and precisely how we tell it. This is a long process which often requires the curator to spend some time with the participant, explaining the concept carefully, the way we wish to tell their story, and by asking them to review all the content before we install it in the gallery.

Participants are often justifiably nervous as to how they will be perceived by the public. For the curator, presenting someone's personal story to the general public is a huge responsibility, but one that can yield wonderful results. We know we have achieved our aim when we receive feedback such as this from Jack Lamont:

"I must state that I was extremely pleased with the way you ... have presented my story in the Devotion theme. You have assembled so many details from various sources and assembled them in a very meaningful way..."³

While ensuring that the individual retains control over their own story, the curator also has to remember that the single story is often being used to represent a wider

² Speech by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, 'Apologies to Australia's Indigenous Peoples', Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, 13th February 2008. Transcript retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.aph.gov.au/house/Rudd_Speech.pdf

³ Personal communication from Jack Lamont, 30 November 2007.

community's experiences or to shed light on an historical event. As we all know, one person's experience of an event can be real for that person, but not for the majority of those in the same situation. A community may also be divided over how they wish their cause or history to be represented. The Eternity curators have encountered this in the past, and will no doubt face it again.

One such story is that of Graeme Clark, the inventor of the bionic ear who is currently featured in Eternity. Professor Clark's lifelong passion, inspired by his deaf father, has been to give deaf and hearing-impaired people the ability to hear speech and to communicate better with those who can hear. However, the development of the cochlear implant angered a portion of the deaf community who saw this as an example of how deafness was seen by the broader community as a 'disease' which could be 'cured'. They argued that effort would be better directed towards educating the public about communicating with deaf people, providing interpreters and improving access to education.⁴

While these views are respected, it is not the role of the Eternity gallery to provide an objective, unbiased coverage of these issues. In focusing on individual experience, the gallery necessarily tells stories from one point of view. In fact, that is its strength and what makes it unique. We do not shy away from that position.

However, we do hope to present a selection of stories with sufficient diversity that everyone who visits the gallery will find at least one story that resonates with their own experience. To do that we aim, in both the short and long term, to ensure diversity in our content. The curators carefully monitor Eternity to ensure that there is the best possible diversity in terms of sex, age, religion, ethnicity and sexuality as well as balancing the famous and the unknown, the living and the dead.

Having found a story to resonate with their own lives, we then help our visitors capture their personal memories in the 'Your Story' component of the exhibition. This an interactive space located within the *Eternity* exhibition which invites visitors to record a one minute film relating to their life. The visitor selects one of the themes of the exhibition to anchor their piece and to provide a framework for their story. Since the opening of the Museum in March 2001 we have collected hundreds of thousands of stories.

Once the stories have been submitted they are watched by a curator. Many people use the booths for purposes other than those that are intended – we delete these clips. Each month a series of clips is edited together and shown on two screens within the exhibition allowing visitors to view stories left by others. In this way visitors are able to contribute content directly to the exhibition, with very little interpretation by the Museum.

I hope that during your time in Canberra you might all come to the Museum and share your memories with us for Eternity.

⁴ Lloyd, K. (2001, October). Cochlear implants: The AAD view. Vicdeaf News. Retrieved 20 February, 2008, from <http://www.aad.org.au>