**Watt’s Invention and the History of Rail Travel**

**(Reproduced from Watt Decade catalogue 1999)**

Every historian knows that the least reliable commentary is by the eyewitness. This doesn’t stop historians seeking out the first-hand account and ironically the best history is often written by historians imaging that they were eyewitnesses. The problem for the eyewitness is memory, whereas the historian's imaginative projection is constructed from the hard evidence of documents and artifacts, those silent witnesses that tell so much. I make this point not only because I write as an unreliable witness, from memory, but also to stress the fact that ideas not events make history.

After the establishment of Watt Space in a single-room shop front in Watt Street in 1989, the informal, founding committee discussed the possibilities fora symbolic motif or logo to be painted on the front window. A light globe got the vote because of its dual significance of “an idea” in popular illustration and ‘wattage’ in electrical parlance. Although I have distinct memory of the big light bulb being painted, I don’t think it stayed on the window for the lifetime of the original Watt Space venue. What I do remember is that at the time one member of the committee argued strongly for a train to be painted on the window. He claimed that it referenced the street name by paying homage to James Watt the inventor of the steam engine and indicated the location of the gallery almost diagonally opposite the corner of the Newcastle Railway Station. Like a lot of stupid ideas, it only had a compelling attraction at

the moment of conception and was soon abandoned. On reflection, however, I don’t think I fully appreciated the metaphoric significance of the train.

To write an accurate account of the railways it would not be possible, as George Kubler pointed out (in *The Shape of Time,* 1963) to use the experience of a single traveler or even several of them “to describe railroads accurately, we are obliged to disregard persons and states, for the railroads themselves are the elements of continuity, and not the travelers or the functionaries thereon.” (p.6) Kubler here uses the rail track as analogy in his discussion of art history. This formulation was not to elide the significance of individual contributions but to stress the continuity of tradition. If tradition is the track, then surely institutions and galleries make up the train and its driver the art world functionaries with its freight and travelers of art and artists.

**Train Spotting.**

Art galleries can take many different shapes or models, but their character (or at least the character of the art displayed in any gallery) is almost solely dependent on who it is that runs the gallery. In general, commercial galleries carry or display art that is most saleable. At the top end of the art market, the most familiar model is the celebrity-dealer gallery where, although the dealer’s validation of particular art simply occurs through selection, once the gallery is established, the dealer’s taste easily masquerades as acquired or intuitive knowledge. Artists in co-operative or artist-run spaces show art sympathetic to the taste or ideology of the group; which usually means their own art. Public museums express the ideals or aims of the institution, admittedly often translated through the taste of individual curators or museum professionals.

So where does Watt Space fit into this scheme of things? There are only about a dozen student galleries in Australia; that is, galleries set up in, or by, art schools to display, promote or sell student work. These are obviously all exclusive, as with the artist-run co-operative model. But within this select group Watt Space is unique and is not the off-campus venue that distinguishes it. Its particular character is formed by its singular organizational infrastructure. Watt Space is administered by a committee which includes a full-time Gallery Director. The Committee comprises equal representation from the student body, The University Union and The School of Fine Art. However, all the executive positions of President, secretary and Treasurer are elected, and held by art students. Also the Director’s vote can decide a deadlock between the three stakeholders of students, Union representatives and Academic staff.

The Director also chairs the most important sub-committee, which actually selects the work to be shown, or projects to be presented, in the galleries. Several times each year students present formal submissions for use of the various gallery spaces and the selection is made by the Exhibition Committee which is made up of the student and art staff members. In other words, this committee structure means that Watt Space reflects some of the characteristics of a co-operative gallery, an institutional gallery and a space administered by a single Director.

**Steam Versus Electricity**

I’m not suggesting that the committee structure alone is responsible for the success of Watt Space for we all know that when a committee sets out to design a horse you end up with a camel. As with any gallery, the architecture and location also plays a significant role. The original venue was chosen simply because it was a shop-front, available at reasonable rent and situated in the inner city. Its immediate popularity through large attendances and high demand from exhibitors saw an expansion from one gallery space to two with the rental of the adjoining space, that it was rumored had previously been occupied by a rather steamy escort agency, and ultimately three separate galleries or rooms. Although they were all situated in the same building, the spatial dynamics of each room were distinctly different. Because display windows in the two largest spaces looked out onto Watt Space, passing shoppers often became first time gallery visitors having been attracted in by the view. All of which helped explain the steady increase in attendances.

By 1994, because Pippa Robinson had set in place efficient protocols for management of the gallery, including selection and installation of work, we, the Committee that is, all considered 11 Watt Street to be an ideal venue for the Gallery. Admittedly the huge crowds at openings could not be accommodated inside but they comfortably filled the footpath outside and it was possible to look in through the doors and windows. It’s not that we had become complacent, but we imagined this was the apogee of the possibilities for a student gallery. Consequently, when it was suggested that the Gallery be moved to a much larger premises recently acquired by the University most of the Committee, myself included, were somewhat reluctant.

In 1994 the University had purchased the old electricity commission premises, NESCA House, and the Union was offered the use of the ground floor. It was when I visited the space with the Director and the student members of the Watt Space Committee and saw the reaction of Pippa and the students to the space that I became convinced of the desirability of the move. Having decided on the shift, much agonizing followed over the name. I certainly argued that Watt Space as a name made no sense unless the Gallery was situated in Watt Street but I was alone against the rest of the Committee members. They argued that the name “Watt Space” did not now represent a specific place or venue but the collective memory of all the exhibitions and exhibitors who had contributed to its history. To change the name would be to lose contact with the reputation for excellence which so many had worked so hard to establish. Such sentiment did not persuade me, and I remained the singular dissenting voice in the final vote to retain the name “Watt Space” for the new Gallery location. The move was successful beyond all expectations and the crowd on the first opening night was so massive that we all imagined it could never be eclipsed, but of course it has been many times since as interest continues to grow. Needless to say nobody finds it odd that Watt Space Galleries is not situated in Watt Street but on the corner of King and Auckland Streets.

**Navigators**

The workers who built the British railways were described as navigators or “navies” and the term survives in parts of Australia where the “navies” do the low paid, high risk, hard work of track maintenance. When the Irish group the Pogues paid homage to these workers in their song Navigator they made the point that although the navies are forgotten they at least left the railway as their legacy, The faceless and sometime forgotten builders of Watt Space cut a somewhat different image to the blue-singlet navies on the railway, for they backed or built it with their executive muscle. As well, they were navigators in the broader sense of the term: Graham Gilchrist, Stan Barwick, Peter Singleton, John Ramsland and, sometimes even taking on the blue-singlet role, John Broughton. Anne Graham has now rolled up her sleeves and taken on “the pick and the shovel and the old dynamite,” to quote the Pogues song.

**Engineers**

It does seem strange that history remembers trains but not train-drivers. Examples such as The Newcastle Flyer, Ghan, or Orient Express show that trains can become legends and familiar to those who never travelled on them. It is because each becomes an embodiment of some imaginative projection of speed, novelty or romantic mystery. In the nineteenth century, train engines also epitomized the collective effort of advanced engineering skill and technological knowledge: which explains why an engineering firm in Manchester would send a locomotive express engine called *Eugenie* to the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1855 despite the fact that it weighed around 20,000tons. On the other hand, if I can generalize from the one example I know, Casey Jones, it would appear that we only remember engine drivers when they are involved in spectacular crashes. When the trip is smooth and incident free, the driver or pilot can expect, at most, a thank-you nod from the passengers with the certainty that their efforts will be soon forgotten.

In steering Watt Space over the past ten years, the Director’s role was never defined by a seat to be occupied with levers and buttons to be operated. The driver’s cap was but one of many hats worn by Pippa Robinson and Penny Metham as they steered the direction of the Gallery with their individual skills, outlook, personalities and philosophies. What they both share in abundance is their professionalism and commitment to nurturing developing artists. The earth-shaking spectacle of the train crash was always averted yet their achievement is awesome nonetheless in the sheer quantity and quality of the cargo they have delivered. Literally thousands of artists have exhibited in Watt Space over the past ten years and the achievements of the selected few in this exhibition bespeak the collective success of their efforts.

**The Track**

As revealing and interesting as these traveler’s tales are we should keep in mind Kubler’s warning that the accounts of several travelers cannot give an accurate understanding of the railway. We must look to the track for the explanation of why Watt Space has come so far with such speed. From its foundation Watt Space has operated on and embodied a number of fundamental ideas, or more correctly, ideals. Most important is the idea that art has values that can be judged by consensus. What art should be and what it should do are beliefs and, like all other belief systems, vary over time. For some years now there has been a plan to terminate the railway line into Newcastle at Civic Station. This will permit the track between Civic and Newcastle Stations to be torn up, erasing the corridor and allowing the city to flow across to the foreshore. All the resistance to this plan is driven by nostalgia, for all logical analysis

shows that Newcastle Station is as redundant as the Customs House across the road or Fort Scratchly on the hill close by. It is difficult for residents to cope with the fact that what was once so important is no longer of any practical value. In the near future, when some Councilors have the courage, the track will be removed and the station will no doubt become a museum as fitted to the nostalgia which is currently its reason for being.

Only when this occurs and the City Centre is revitalized will we feel comfortable about the loss, for progress is always feared when it involves destruction of the old. Of course the railway will remain, but for the time being at least, terminating at Civic Station. In art too, progress is measured by the always partial and sometimes Pyrrhic victory of the new over the old and it is equally difficult to tell the difference. Each generation of artists absorbs and acknowledges the traditions of the trade. The good artists adapt these to contemporary needs and the best artists aspire to transcend them. Inevitably, art schools are the place where the battles between the old and new is played out and ironically the students that master the traditions most rapidly are often those who reject them first in favour of their own inventiveness.

Since it has been the task of Watt Space to showcase the results of this battle, the art exhibited over the past ten years has varied greatly. For example, installation based work appeared only two years after opening, in the early nineties, but is now the norm for many young artists showing there. It is also the consensus of the rest of the contemporary art world, that installation-based work is the most dynamic expression of new art ideas. This may –no – will change, and Watt Space will be responsive to the change and not because it blindly follows fashions but because it is driven by the internal combustion which results when an institution and its staff are responsive to the voices of each generation of emerging artists. While it remains, that is, a site to test the combustive power of the clash between new and old, with staff who understand the connections between smoke and fire and possess the sinew to feed the flame.

**Baggage Collection**

When Penny Metham asked me to write a catalogue essay, she suggested I reflect on the idea or philosophy of Watt Space over this past decade. I presume I was chosen for this task because I alone am the passenger who has travelled the full distance. Perhaps then, Penny expected some of the many travellers’ tales I have heard along the way. The debt we owe for the journey to Jacquie Henderson and George Drewery is acknowledged elsewhere in this catalogue. So, in conclusion, I must apologize for the indulgence I have taken in writing this very personal history instead.

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