

Cuts threaten future of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art

Richard Phillips
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The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia's leading venue for the exhibition of modern art, has dismissed 16 people, more than a third of its staff. The MCA's executive is undertaking a 20 percent cost-cutting exercise that eliminates key programs and places a question mark over the museum's future.

Management assured MCA workers last December 15 that there was no "sacking list" and that any restructuring would involve the closest consultation with staff. On January 14, however, staff members were called into 15-minute individual interviews and told that their positions would no longer exist after February 12.

Most of those affected were employed on pay rates lower than workers in similar jobs at the Art Gallery of NSW and Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, but worked extended hours and on weekends without overtime to maintain services. Under an agreement ratified by the Public Service Association, overtime was not paid without working a minimum of 53 hours a week.

In a press statement announcing the cuts, MCA executive chairman John Kaldor claimed the museum would focus on "core business, on artistic excellence, and on activities that help fund the museum. There will be fewer and more outstanding exhibitions, and I have every confidence in the museum's success this year and beyond...[W]e are exploring ways that will ensure the museum has a secure future."

But rather than guaranteeing a "secure future," the cuts at the MCA are so severe and wide-ranging that doubts are being raised as to whether the museum can be a serious venue for innovative art by local and international artists. The cuts are a major blow to the efforts of artists, film and moving-image makers, curators and other art museum workers to maintain a reputable and widely accessible institution.

The programs to be axed are moving-image exhibitions, documentation of the MCA's collection, outward loans of art to other institutions, and public programs—including artists' talks, conferences, forums and lectures. Public lectures, debates and discussion forums have accompanied every major exhibition, providing a vital link between local and international artists, students and art lovers.

One of the positions eliminated was that of the Cinémathèque curator. This has placed the entire Cinémathèque project, a major feature of the museum since it was established, in jeopardy. There is now no film or video curator employed at any of Australia's state- or federally-funded museums or galleries. Links with filmmakers, video and multi-media artists, the Australian Film Commission and other film bodies are also threatened.

The importance of the Cinémathèque is indicated by the extensive program it has organised over the last seven and a half years. Despite minimal funding and a part-time temporary film screening venue, the Cinémathèque screened over 1,000 films and video titles, including the banned films of the Czechoslovak New Wave, Japanese animation, films from Taiwan, China, New Zealand, the Philippines, Latin America, and innovative Australian films, as well as many ground-breaking moving-image exhibitions.

The MCA was established in 1989 by the University of Sydney, with funds from its Power Bequest, and support from the New South Wales state government, which provided minimal funding and then a venue, the old Maritime Services Board building. This is a prime location, just near the Harbour Bridge and looking across Circular Quay to the Opera House.

Official funding from the NSW Ministry of the Arts and the federal Arts Council, however, is little more

than a token gesture--approximately \$400,000 a year. This is barely enough to mount an exhibition, let alone pay wages, insurance and other costs associated with running a museum. The MCA has to raise 89 percent of recurrent costs through ticket sales, leasing and corporate sponsorship.

As a consequence, even if the MCA survives the current cuts, it faces greater control by the corporate sponsors, restricted to housing so-called blockbuster shows with ground-breaking or controversial exhibitions by lesser-known artists unlikely.

MCA staff and supporters bitterly opposed the cuts at a rally outside the museum on February 12, the last day of work for sacked MCA workers.

David Watson, the sacked Cinémathèque curator, said the museum had been brutally damaged by the "sophisticated ignorance" of the MCA executive. The elimination of 16 jobs had serious consequences for the MCA and moving-image artists throughout Australia. "[A]fter years of struggle and glimpses of hope," the museum has "lost a beachhead for the moving image," Watson said.

Mike Parr, one of the country's leading artists, denounced the MCA management and demanded increased government funding for the arts. The necessity for the MCA to find 89 percent of its recurrent financing, he said, had resulted in "a progressive sacrifice of curatorial integrity" and a MCA board "top heavy with CEOs and Sydney University academics".

Parr recounted an encounter with a mobile phone company representative whose firm was sponsoring an exhibition: "Market research had told him that the average visitor to the MCA was a young woman in her early 30s, single with a high level of disposable income and with a strong interest presumably in the arts and mobile phones. There is nothing wrong with this sort of stuff ... but target audiences are not the basis for serious curatorship and fashion is notoriously fickle and insecure."

He continued: "Art is held hostage to business, and good young curators are demoralised by the marketing department." Contrasting the higher levels of government support for the arts in other countries, Parr concluded with a call for "more government money to break the stranglehold of its dependence on the corporate world".

Lyndal Phelps, a MCA youth programs curator, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the closure of public programs would undermine the integrity of the museum.

"The level of government funding, or lack of it, is appalling. We have to sell our souls to get funds and that means that we have put up with blatant company advertising and sometimes with them selling their products here. For example, at the moment we have a Seppelt wine company bar in the gallery space in Level Three because they have sponsored a show.

"It's appalling that neither government, state or federal, attaches any importance to contemporary art, or at least considers it worthy of receiving enough funds to maintain a decent exhibition venue and cultural resource in Australia's largest city. The arts are regarded as secondary and at this moment we are being over-ridden by the Olympics."



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