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**The Immaculate Perception Project:
Exhibition Creation and Reception in a
New Zealand Regional Art Museum**

**Thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Philosophy in Museum Studies
Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.**

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Abstract

Internationally, museums have increasingly come under review since Bourdieu's (1969) research focused on art gallery visiting patterns and cultural codes.

Museums exist within a post-modern milieu that demands a more democratic approach to defining their cultural and educational role within society. Over the last decade in particular, art museums, criticised for being elitist and insular within their communities, have been challenged to be more inclusive, accessible and relevant to their local communities.

The literature suggests that a review of the core mission and the culture of museums is required to provide the catalyst for change. However, there is little evidence or few models offered as to how such re-visioning could be implemented. New Zealand art museums have been slow in responding to the issues, or to conducting research involving either their visitors or their communities. These emergent issues provided the context for this study, which is focused on the creation and reception of a community based exhibition within a contemporary regional art museum.

This exhibition project brought together community participants and established artists, and the study evaluates the responses of the exhibition creators and the exhibition audience. In line with action research methodology, evaluation surveys and observational data were collected during the distinct phases of the project and resulted in a number of findings that have implications for regional art museums.

The findings from this present study indicate that curators working alongside the community with an action research methodology, while developing exhibition projects, can produce positive outcomes for the participants, the audience and the museum. Creative partnerships can be established that enhance life-long-learning opportunities and contribute to the relevance of museums within their communities.

The present study also proposes that museums re-vision their mission to become 'learning organisations' (Senge, 1994, 2000) and provides a model that could be appropriate for museums intent on enriching their organisational culture and enhancing their significance and profile within their community.

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Foreword

Author's Note

Museums and art galleries have always been a source of attraction and fascination for me. This began relatively early in life. I was fortunate to live in Wellington, a short bike ride away from the old Dominion Museum and Academy of Fine Arts. I would frequently wander alone among the treasure trove of glass cases filled with amazing collections of ancient artifacts, terrifying weaponry, enormous insects and stuffed animals, frozen in time. They were a mix of the bizarre and the beautiful and a source of endless fascination to a young mind. I loved the huge variety, the orderly jumble and clutter of the glass cabinets and that you could lose yourself within the maze of shiny linoleum, deserted corridors of exhibits and spend time with favourite things.

I have since visited many wonderful museums here in New Zealand and in other parts of the world and have noticed a remarkable change in the presentation, design and layout of museums. Many international museums are highly valued by communities as cultural assets that attract visitors and tourists who contribute to the wider commercial infrastructures of the community. This has contributed to the investment in the re-design and upgrading of the many traditional museum sites. Exhibitions and events, designed to attract large numbers of visitors, are also a characteristic of contemporary museum programmes.

The role of the art museum in this current climate is one that I find particularly interesting. I have been a regular visitor to art museums and galleries, and as a tertiary educator in the visual arts, I consider that museums have a unique contribution to make within communities, with their potential to enrich lives. Art museums privilege the visual experience and provide excellent primary resources and opportunities to complement an education in the visual arts.

However, visiting an art museum or gallery is often a new and sometimes revelatory experience for many tertiary students, even those with some secondary school visual art education. Given the appropriate background and introductions to the exhibitions, they can discover, at first-hand, the wonderful world of visual art in its many forms and genres. However, visual art does not always speak for itself. One concern is that

art museums do relatively very little, with either their collections or their programmes, to be inclusive to, or engage, first-time visitors, their usual audience, or their wider communities within their exhibitions programme. Although the variety of the artworks and the professionalism evident in the presentation of most exhibitions displayed within our public art museums is generally impressive, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is difficult for local artists and craftspeople to have exhibitions of their work in local regional galleries.

There is also a greater variety and number of exhibitions being shown than ever before. However, in my view, too many opportunities are lost in bringing exhibitions and artworks alive and making them accessible, relevant and meaningful to a wider audience. For curators and designers to hang or mount exhibitions, put up the labels and then walk away, thinking the job is done, is questionable practice. The exhibition is only one half of the equation, the visitor experience completes it.

Another concern is that art museums rarely involve their communities in the planning or development of exhibition programmes. Perhaps if the mission and exhibition programmes of public art museums were re-orientated to emphasise the community and audience response and participation, a new journey of discovery could be charted. But are our public art museums ready to reset the compass to a true magnetic reading and set sail? By setting such a course, the significance and role of the art museum within society could be enhanced, along with their contribution to life-long learning opportunities within their communities. Making such an investment would also contribute significantly to the long-term viability of regional art museums in their communities.

Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Foreword	iii
Contents	v
Appendices	x
List of Figures	xii
List of Tables	xv

Introduction

Introduction.....	1
Motivation for this study.....	1
A brief profile of art museums	2
The wider current art museum context in terms of post-modernist challenges...	3
The Current Context.....	3
Related Issues	5
Museum Relevance	8
The New Zealand art museum context	10
The aims of the present study	12
Research Questions	12
Research Design & Methodology	13
Action Research.....	15
Methodology.....	16
Exhibition Creation	17
Exhibition Reception Studies	17
The Site	18
Revised Mission Statement.....	20
Exhibitions Policy	20
Limitations of the Study.....	20
Preview of Chapters	22

Chapter I Literature Review

Introduction.....	24
Museums and Cultural Context.....	24
Exhibition Reception.....	28
Museum Audiences.....	30
Museum Audiences and Learning.....	31
Personal Context.....	33
Social Context.....	35
Physical Context.....	36
Museum Effectiveness and Outcomes.....	38
Conceptual Frameworks and Meaning-Making.....	39
Museums and Future Challenges.....	43
The New Zealand Context.....	44
Action Research.....	46
Recent Trends in Action Research.....	47
Summary.....	51

Chapter II Methodology in the Field

Introduction.....	54
Phase One: Exhibition Creation.....	55

Chapter III Exhibition Concept and Participants

Exhibition Title.....	58
The Exhibition Brief.....	58
Exhibition Messages.....	58
Justification: The mandala symbol as exhibition theme.....	59
Exhibition Participants.....	60
Community Groups.....	61
International Artists.....	63

Chapter IV Exhibition Development: Methodology in Action

Introduction.....	64
The Presentations	64
The Workshops.....	65
Workshop 1	65
Workshop 2.....	67
Workshop 1. Felters and Floral Arts	67
Installation Artist.....	68
Dialogue with other artists	69
Profiles and labels for exhibition.....	70
Evaluations.....	70

Chapter V Findings: Exhibition Development

Introduction.....	71
Phase One: Background.....	71
Survey One: Purpose.....	72
Survey One: Findings.....	73
Participant Prior Knowledge and Response to Presentation.....	73
Participant Involvement: Reasons and Motivation	73
Participant Self-Concept.....	74
Participant Visiting Patterns	74
Participant Expectations.....	74
Summary: Survey One.....	74
Survey Two: Exhibition Creation.....	75
Purpose of Survey Two.....	75
Validity of Survey Instrument	75
Response to Survey Two Statements and Data Analysis.....	76
Personal Agenda Questions.....	80
Participant opinion on the future of the group mandalas.....	83
Tibetan Mandala Event: Influence and Impact.....	84
Summary.....	85

Chapter VI Exhibition Reception Evaluation: Participants and Visitors

Introduction to Phase Two	88
Validity.....	88
Part One: Artists, Craft Groups and Gallery Staff Responses & Analysis	88
Survey 3: Purpose.....	88
Survey 3: Response and Emerging Patterns	89
Exhibition Evaluation.....	90
Analysis of Cohort Responses as Positive and Negative Indicators	91
Evaluation Statements Analysis	92
Exhibition Design, Layout, and Concept.....	92
Exhibition Opening	93
Visitor Flow	93
Mandala Symbol: Knowledge/ Understanding /Aesthetic Appreciation.....	94
Exhibition Concept.....	95
Exhibition Theme: Evaluation of Exhibition Components	96
Technical Aspects.....	98
Future Plans and Aspirations.....	99
Part Two: Exhibition Visitors Response	103
Introduction.....	103
Rationale for Questionnaires	104
Questionnaire 1.....	104
Questionnaire 2.....	104
Questionnaire 3.....	104
Prior Knowledge.....	105
Visitor Evaluation Findings and Analysis	106
New and Returning Visitor Ratio.....	108
Visiting Patterns of Returning Visitors.....	109
Visitor Areas	110
Finding Out About the Exhibition and Reason for Visiting.....	112
Tibetan Mandala Influence	113
Response to the Exhibition	114
Exhibition Components: Questionnaire 3.....	117

Evaluation of Exhibition Components.....	117
Evaluation of Information Labels.....	119
Visitor Perceptions of the Exhibition Themes and Messages	121
Tracking	123
Findings.....	123
Summary	124

Chapter VII Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction.....	129
Question 1	132
Question 2	134
Question 3	136
Question 4	140
Further Implications and Recommendations	144

Select Bibliography	158
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Appendices

Appendix 1	Mandala Definitions
Appendix 2	<u>Exhibition Agreement</u>
Appendix 3 a.	Easter & Central Community Trust Funding Letter
Appendix 3 b.	Palmerston North Community Arts Council: Letter
Appendix 4	Letter to Artists
Appendix 5 a.	Participants Information Sheet
Appendix 5 b.	Participants Consent Form.
Appendix 5 c.	Post Work-Shop Questionnaire
Appendix 5 d.	Workshop1 Questionnaire Results
Appendix 6a	Survey Two Statements: Craft group participants.
Appendix 6 b.	Survey Two Results: Craft group participants.
Appendix 6 c.	Survey Three: Participants Exhibition Evaluation.
Appendix 7 a.	Visitor questionnaire: Short version.
Appendix 7 b.	Visitor questionnaire: Long version.
Appendix 8.	How to Look at Mandalas: Gallery sheet.
Appendix 9 a.	Gallery Staff Exhibition Evaluation.
Appendix 9 b.	Extension workshop participant's exhibition evaluation.
Appendix 9 c.	Evaluation of exhibition theme (Statement 13).
Appendix 9 d.	Exhibition evaluation of technical and aesthetic aspects.
Appendix 10 a.	Tracking sheet showing 'cool' spot & visitor movement.
Appendix 10 b.	Tracking sheet showing computer interaction.
Appendix 10 c.	Tracking sheet showing intensive looking , circulatory and zig-zag pattern of visitor movement.
Appendix 11 a.	Dowse Art Museum Mission Statement.
Appendix 11 b.	Dowse Art Museum Core Values Schema.
Appendix 12	Letter to the Editor.
Appendix 13	Letter of thanks to craft group.

List of Figures

Figure

1	Craft Mandalas: Doilies	xiii
2	The Contextual Model of Learning	32
3	The Feed-back Loop	40
4	Showing the relationship between individual and group cultural Change, and the domain of action within an organisational structure	42
5	Action research as a self-reflective spiral	48
6	The generative action research model	49
7	Detail of completed <i>Tibetan Sand Mandala</i>	56
8	Robyn Parkinson's mandala: <i>Quilted Journey</i>	61
9	Gordon Thompson's <i>Koru Mandala</i>	68
10.1	Statement 1 Graph Result	76
10.2	Statement 2 Graph Result	76
10.3	Statement 3 Graph Result	77
10.4	Statement 4 Graph Result	78
10.5	Statement 5 Graph Result	78
10.6	Statement 6 Graph Result	79
10.7	Statement 7 Graph Result	80
10.8	Statement 8 Graph Result	80
10.9	Statement 9 Graph Result	81
10.10	Statement 10 Graph Result	82
10.11	Statement 11 Graph Result	82
10.12	Statement 12 Graph Result	83
10.13	Statement 13 Graph Result	84
10.14	Statement 14 Graph Result	85
11	Visitors at desk site responding to exhibition questionnaire	86
12.1	Graphs showing total positive and negative responses to evaluation questions	91
12.2	Debra Bustin Installation: <i>House of Spirits</i>	96
12.3	Graphs for Table 3	97
12.4	Graphs showing the cohort responses to Statement 6	99
12.5	Floral Arts mandala	100
12.6	Graphs showing participants' interest in future projects	101
12.7	Craft objects displaying mandala design symmetry.....	102
13	Exhibition Desk Site	103
14.1	Graph showing responses to Question 15	107

14.2	Graph showing responses to Question 2	108
14.3	Graph showing responses to Question 3	109
14.4a	Graph showing responses to Question 16a.....	109
14.4b	Graph showing responses to Question 16b	110
14.5	Graph showing responses to Question 13	110
14.6	Graph showing occupation of respondents (Question 14).....	111
14.7	Graph showing respondents reason for visiting exhibition (Question 6)	112
14.8	Graph showing how visitors found out about the exhibition (Question 7)	112
14.9	Graph showing respondents who visited the Tibetan Sand Mandala (Question 4a).....	113
14.10	Graph showing responses to Question 4b	113
14.11	Graph showing Table 6 displayed as a bar graph.....	115
14.12	Graph showing respondents enjoyment of the exhibition (Question 9)	115
14.13	Graph showing visitor interest in the exhibition Information	116
14.14	Graph showing responses to Question 17	117
14.15	Graph showing responses to Question 19	118
15	Visitor reading information panels	118
16.1	Graph showing response to Question 23	119
16.2	Graph showing response to Question 24	119
16.3	Graph showing response to Question 25	120
16.4	Graph showing response to Question 21	120
17.1	Graph showing respondent perceptions of the exhibition	122
17.2	Tracking Data	124
17.3	Graph showing patterns of movement through exhibition space	125
17.4	Graph showing degree of visitor interaction with the exhibition components	125
18	Peter Roche's light sculpture: <i>Point Blank</i>	126
19	Visitor's mandala design display	128
20	Felted Mandala: Group work	147
21	Rt.Hon. Steve Maharey M.P. engaged with the mandala computer site	150
22	Showing the relationship between individual and group cultural change and the domain of action within a museum organisation	153
23	<i>The Communicative Spiral</i> showing action research cycles contributing to the core mission of learning	155
24	Exhibition visitor with Peter Roach mandala in the background	157

List of Tables

Table

1	Showing contact and collaboration with craft group participants.....	65
2	Showing contact and collaboration with contributing artists	70
3	Showing exhibition evaluation responses	90
4	Showing details of questionnaire evaluations	104
5	Showing age and gender of visitors to the exhibition.....	106
6	Showing respondent responses to the exhibition (Question 8)	114
7	Showing respondents selection of statements relating to the exhibition messages (Question 12)	121

Figure 1

Craft Mandalas: Doilies



Mandala :The Immaculate Perception

Introduction

The successful museum of the next century must be connected to the community far more continuously and closely than we can imagine today. (Skramstad, 1996, p.39)

This introduction provides an overview of this present study. A brief profile of art museums generally is firstly presented in order to position the research motivation. Then the wider current art museum context in terms of post-modernist challenges and related critical issues is described. The New Zealand art museum context is then described in relation to the international context providing a platform for this present study. The main aims of the present study are then outlined showing their integral links with the current challenges and critical issues facing art museums. Four research questions arising from the main aims are then postulated. The research design and methodology including a description of the specific research site and its inherent limitations are outlined. Finally, brief summaries of each chapter are presented.

The core argument of this study is that art museums within creative communities wishing to be more inclusive, accessible and relevant to those communities, need to be exploring alternative ways of creating and curating exhibitions with the artists, craftspeople and other stakeholders within their communities; ways that go beyond the traditional approach of the curator (and the museum) standing out-side the creative phase of the art-making. The author believes this to be an important issue particularly relevant to regional art museums facing the challenges associated with increasing visitor numbers and maintaining the moral and the financial support of their communities.

Motivation for this study

This study was motivated by the author's interest in being involved in a community project that had the potential to involve and inspire solo artists and amateur community groups, and bring their work together in one exhibition. As an art educator within a tertiary institution and with a little experience in the museum profession¹, the author was interested in curating an exhibition that presented work resulting from two

¹Exhibitions Officer 1974-1976: Manawatu Art Gallery

very different creative processes, and documenting the responses of the contributors and the visitors to the exhibition. The author acknowledges a commitment to the democratic principles and social values which underpin this study. He has also been involved with Te Manawa over a long period of time as a gallery society member and committee member², and more recently as a ‘friend’ of Te Manawa.

A brief profile of art museums

New Zealand regional art museums are busy places. However, to a casual visitor passing through on any day of the week, that may not be the perception. The walls and spaces in the various galleries will likely be adorned with art works in a variety of media, styles and conceptual approaches depending on the exhibitions featuring at that time. But if visitors arrive on their own, the likelihood is they will find themselves in a relatively uninhabited and tranquil environment, and will not give a moment’s thought as to how those works came to be on exhibition, or why the gallery is so quiet and devoid of other visitors.

A look behind the scenes, however, reveals a quite different picture. A typical exhibition year planner for an art museum, with a number of galleries to fill, resembles an array of multi-track railway lines with the exhibitions boxed within their allotted dates, resembling carriages, lined up almost bumper to bumper and jostling for position. Exhibitions come and go frequently and, at most times of the year, gallery staff will be involved with exhibition installations or transitions. Gallery planning and bookings, involving touring exhibitions, guest artists and other in-house exhibitions, usually need to be made at least a year in advance.

This approach to programme planning results in a rich variety of exhibitions and constant change. However, the rapid turn-around of exhibitions frequently places staff under considerable pressure in working to tight deadlines. It also reinforces traditional hierarchical management structures by requiring staff to take responsibility for specific aspects of the exhibition creation cycle that are defined by their professional designation (e.g. curator, designer, exhibition officer etc.). It also signals that the culture of the museum organisation may be concerned more with art objects and collections than people and communities.

² During a period when it operated as the Manawatu Art Gallery

The wider current art museum context in terms of post-modernist challenges

Within a post-modernist context and in relation to the international discourses concerning the democratisation of organisations within civil society, museums in general and art museums, in particular, have been perceived as elitist and insular. (Bourdieu, 1984; Zolberg, 1990; Karp, 1992; Perin, 1992).

For over a decade, a number of challenges have been issued from critics to museums in the west that include: challenges to deconstruct the aesthetic canon and acknowledge cultural difference, questions of who controls exhibitions and collection processes, and rethinking the relationship between artists and exhibitors (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Karp, 1992; Perin, 1992). Thus museums have been challenged to implement changes in their policies and practices to enhance their relevance to local communities, and to widen their audience. If they do not respond to these challenges and become more community inclusive and connected, predictions are that their long-term survival as viable organisations may be in doubt (Skramstad, 1996).

The Current Context

To help change the relations between museums and communities it has been suggested that the 'audience', traditionally considered by museums as a passive entity, needs to become the 'community' and to be understood as an active agent (Karp, 1992, p.12).

Although the museum-going public is steadily growing (Donnelly, 1995) research has shown that the demographic profiles and attendance rates of audiences has not changed in proportion to the increase in visitor numbers (Winter, 1991; Schuster, 1993; McDermott Miller, 1996). Attempts by major museums to attract wider audiences through their exhibition and educational programmes has apparently not resulted in any significant diversification in their membership or public support. While visitor numbers have grown, the proportion of the demographic cohort visiting museums and in particular art museums appears to have remained static, and there is no evidence that a wider audience is being attracted to museums (Merriman, 1991; Van Mensch, 1993).

The situation of a static base of regular visitors is also likely to be the case in most New Zealand regional art galleries, although, as the Literature Review for this project will indicate, the research is yet to be done in this area.

The post-modernist challenges to international museum culture and practice have also reached New Zealand, influencing the mission and design of new museums (e.g. the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa); the re-design of existing institutions (e.g. Auckland War Memorial Museum); and, in some instances, approaches to exhibition programmes (e.g. Home Fires exhibition - Dowse Art Museum).

However, museums and public art galleries have responded in varying degrees. Addressing these challenges, in ways that are relevant, and that relate to an increasingly pluralistic society often involving many distinct communities, has presented museums wishing to attract a wider audience within their community, with a number of issues.

The pressure of exploring new ideas in programme and exhibition design, in times of diminishing resources, can place museums in a paradoxical situation (Janes, 1996). On one hand, museums are unable to meet the increasing demands of their public, while on the other they are financially limited in their conservation and curatorial responsibilities, as guardians of “store houses of individual and collective consciousness” (Janes, p.87). Running professional museums places heavy demands on public funding, and grant allocations are often capped or under pressure to be reduced. This can result in funding being spread thinly among the various divisional budgets related to the organisational and professional tasks and responsibilities that are involved in running a contemporary museum.

Visiting museums has also become increasingly popular as a leisure and tourist activity. In America, museum visiting is becoming the predominant out-of-home leisure activity (Falk & Dierking, 1992). In the interests of future development, it is important for museums to be familiar with the characteristics of their current support base, and to work at encouraging, expanding and replenishing this support. Within art museums this involves staff, visitors, non-visitors, artists, craftspeople, community groups, educational institutions, business and other organisations including funding agencies. As the present study was sited within an art museum, the primary focus of the research was predominantly related to that context.

Research into museum practice, including visitor and non-visitor studies, though time consuming and expensive to conduct, can offer museums insights into unique aspects of their environment (local and institutional), their programmes, and their audiences (actual and potential). Art museums failing to undertake such studies, or make

use of existing research, may find their organisations increasingly marginalised culturally, socially and financially, in the future (Skramstad, 1996). Such studies that have been undertaken within overseas museums have led to some fundamental revisions of exhibition praxis, for example the interpretive strategies that have influenced gallery space and design concepts at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Worts, 1993, p.48).

Therefore, in order to address their critics, and face up to the challenges, it would be prudent for art museums to pay particular attention to their relationship with their communities, and to the issues of relevance, visitor experience and demographics.

Related Issues

The term ‘museum’ can apply to a variety of organisations, small and large. From a rural historic building, managed and staffed by local volunteers, to a larger and more complex institution, located within a city and staffed by professionals with particular skills and knowledge. The term is also used in a generic sense to include museums of art, art galleries, and science, technology and history museums. Ames (1990) argues that there are profound differences between art museums and other museums in terms of their ideologies, social and political views that influence the curatorial professions within each, and their distinction between art and artifact. Art museums privilege visual experience and have evolved within a western tradition that perceived art as “the heroically personal, subjective and non-utilitarian expression of creativity”, whereas history museums have embodied the objectivity and ideology of western science (Ames 1990, p.28).

Although historically all museums have been primarily concerned with collections and research, they are increasingly being viewed as cultural institutions with an educational role to play in providing public learning (Falk & Dierking, 1992). Within the critical discourse concerning their practices, museums have also come under increasing pressure to become more inclusive to previously marginalised groups, including women and ethnic minorities (Zolberg 1990, p.169). Thus the democratisation (and popularisation) of museums has seen exhibitions which emphasise narratives, telling stories of the everyday rather than always privileging the aesthetic or higher art forms. Inclusiveness also involves becoming a “listener” as well as a “talker” within the community when fostering closer links, and establishing collaborative relationships, with a sense of “trustworthiness” (Skramstad 1996, p.169). Skramstad considers

trustworthiness to be the most important dimension to the relationship between museums and their communities.

In response to the call for democratisation within museums in modern countries, there is also a growing commitment to make previously “elite-based art forms” accessible to a wider audience (Zolberg, 1993, p.22). Expanded labels and other interpretive aids have been utilised to improve access to works of art (Frank, 1992; Hein, 1991, Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Russell, 1995). Blockbuster exhibitions have also played a part in popularising art (Bennett, 1988).

Museums hosting such events have their critics, who claim they are pandering to mediocrity and losing sight of their fundamental purpose (Hooper-Greenhill, 1993, Zolberg, 1993, Wood, 1993). Wood identifies this as a structural tension between the art museum’s purpose within society, which arises out of “an inevitable strain between aesthetic quality and the freedom of expression on the one hand and the entertainment industry on the other” (p.36).

The role of the museum within civil society as a site for contesting assertions about who has the right to define and control the different identities (cultural, or otherwise) within society, has also highlighted the social significance of museums (Karp, 1992). Museums are not only repositories of knowledge, objects of value, visual interest, and taste, but can also contribute to education, or produce social commitments beyond those that can be produced in other educational and civic settings. Karp considers that museums define relations with their communities “whether they intend to or not” (p.6), and how museums accommodate multiple communities in their exhibition programmes is a critical factor that can contribute to producing a civil society that accommodates diversity. Therefore the nature of museums makes them key institutions in the production of social ideas, and gives them responsibilities to their communities (p.10). Karp suggests that it is one thing for museums to widen their audiences “and another for the public to claim the museum” (p.11).

Hooper-Greenhill (1993) contends that art museums have remained unresponsive and been concerned predominantly with increasing visitor numbers, rather than focusing on specific audience needs, while other types of museums have worked at developing the quality of the visitor experience. She suggests that art museums should concentrate on quality (visitor experience), rather than quantity (visitor numbers), and proposes a range of

strategies to develop better experiences for all visitors. These include conducting visitor studies to find out who is visiting and why. Presenting exhibitions that visitors relate to, so as to encourage more local and repeat visits, is another strategy along with improving the quality of permanent exhibitions.

Using market research methodology, recent developments in British museums have resulted in audiences being re-conceptualised as “target groups”, rather than being referred to collectively as “the general public” or “the museum visitor” (Hooper-Greenhill 1993, p.80). Using this model, museums can consider who these groups might be and then develop exhibitions and programmes to meet their specific needs. Target groups can include life-stage or special needs categories that can include schools, families, retired people, and those with physical and cognitive impairment. In the present study, local artists and craft groups comprise the target groups. Winter (1991), considers that target audience issues are directly related to exhibition choice and design, as well as acquisition policies. Thus, target audiences can also be relevant to the issue of the museums relating more to their communities and becoming more inclusive and accessible.

Merriman (1991) contends that numerous visitor surveys in North America and Europe indicate that current museum-going publics tend to be younger, more highly educated and affluent than the general population. It also follows, that “the elderly, the less well educated and the less affluent are not going to museums in proportion to their numbers in the overall population” (p.129), although there are exceptions to this attributed to individual museum types.

The European context reflects a similar concern with the visitor profile that exists with museum audiences. Van Mensch (1993), views art museums as comprising a diverse category of museums, ranging from large traditional old masters museums to small contemporary art galleries. He argues that visitor participation and demographic data tend to be site specific and not interchangeable. Further, contemporary art museums are considered to have very select audiences of well educated, interested and highly critical people.

A phenomenon of our modern age is the increased options in leisure activities available for socially mobile people. Van Mensch advances that the number of options for spending leisure time grows faster than amount of leisure time available. Thus, people participate in more activities but do so with less frequency. This, he contends, has serious

implications for contemporary art museums as they depend on regular visitors rather than occasional visitors.

Van Mensch advocates a more community orientated approach and considers that the future of art museums will depend on finding a balance between regular visitors and occasional visitors. Therefore, particular consideration should be given to attracting occasional visitors. To do this, museums must strive to be more “socially relevant” (p.108) and also define their identity.

The issue of developing, and sustaining, on-going relationships within local communities needs to be addressed in relation to the question of how this can be done in ways that are relevant and relate to an increasingly pluralistic society, often involving many distinct communities (Karp & Lavine in Karp, Kreamer & Lavine, 1992). This presents contemporary art museums, wishing to address these issues within their exhibitions programme, with a dilemma. On the one hand there is the professional responsibility to keep abreast with the complexity and diversity of contemporary art practice within a post-modernist milieu, and on the other, there is the pressure to be more accessible to and inclusive of their communities. (Bennett, 1988, 1991; McManus, 1989, Bitgood, 1990; Zolberg, 1990; Merriman, 1991; Hood, 1981, 1983, 1992; Perin, 1992; Doering, 1992; Falk & Dierking, 1992; Schuster, 1995; Janes, 1996).

Museum Relevance

The word relevance relates to the suitability, affinity, relation or connection of one thing to another. Thus, in the context of this study the term museum relevance refers to the museum’s affinity, relation or connectedness with its community.

The concept of establishing what has been termed the “communicative circle” (Perin, 1992, p.182) has been seen as a key issue related to the question of relevance for museums to address. The term originated in relation to the communication systems or feedback loops (Cameron, 1968) that museums put in place in order to find out if the exhibition messages have been decoded by visitors. Perin suggests a cultural theory of representation and reception may assist in the reassessment of museum practice for museum professionals, scholars, critics, as well as museum audiences, and examines “the workings of the communicative circle that links them as exhibition makers and viewers” (p.182).

This thesis is more concerned with documenting and analysing the processes of developing and evaluating the reception of exhibitions, and in seeking to describe the relationship between exhibition creators and exhibition viewers, than in exploring theories of cultural representation.

In the context of the current socio-cultural issues of relevance, and relating to local communities, the communicative circle has widened in concept to embrace the entire museum gestalt³ (Falk & Dierking, 2000). The communicative circle initially arises from the cultural milieu of the museum, involving the mission, and supporting organisational structures of staffing (expertise, duties, responsibilities) and programme planning (involving exhibitions and activities), including management and administrative considerations (Perin, 1992; Worts, 1993; Skramstad, 1996). Merriman (1991) contends that for museums to become accepted as an integral part of the community they “should devolve to as local a scale as possible” (p.137) to avoid being perceived as irrelevant institutions detached from daily life.

The concept of learning as meaning-making has emerged as an integral aspect of constructivist theory (Hein, 1991, Johassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999) which is to be expanded on within the Literature Review. In line with this theory, the interrelationship of contexts (personal, physical and socio-cultural) has also been proposed as a model for considering museum experiences from visitors’ perspectives (Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2000). Cultural values can influence both personal and organisational contexts.

Cartwright (1999) suggests that cultural values are the key to the effective management of organisations. Therefore, any improvements within this domain will contribute to the evolution of the organisation. How a museum perceives its cultural values, its role, and its relationship to its community is expressed within its core mission statement. A re-assessment and re-interpretation of the mission of museums has also been advocated as part of the reform that must be undertaken by those organisations wishing to become more relevant to their local communities (Worts, 1993). This process should also involve input from the local community. A suggested new mission, which also has a strong resonance with the current study undertaken within an art museum context is:

³ According to Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, a “gestalt” is a “structure or configuration of physical, biological, or psychological phenomena so integrated as to constitute a functional unit with properties not derivable from its parts in summation.”

...to relate to the public in a meaningful way, through the vehicle of symbolic experiences, which reflects/mirrors the cultural identity of a community and which supports individuals in affirming and evolving their personal identity
(Worts, 1993, p.5).

The constructivist concept of the 'learning organisation' (Senge, 1990, 1994) originally advanced as a model for reconceptualising business culture, has more recently been adapted for educational organisations. The Senge model is based on a philosophical approach and offers a rationale that incorporates and engages a number of disciplines. This application of this model to the museum context will be discussed in more detail in the Literature Review (Senge, Cabron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, Kleiner, 2000).

The New Zealand art museum context

The issues outlined thus far also apply to New Zealand regional art museums. The new Local Government Act (2002) asks local authorities to be accountable for the cultural enhancement of their communities:

To enable local decision-making by and on behalf of citizens in their local communities to promote their social, economic, cultural and environmental well-being in the present, and the future.

(Local Government New Zealand Consultation Document (2000, p. 13).

The problems associated with budget restraints are common to most publicly funded organisations within New Zealand. Relating to local communities will also become an issue for our regional galleries to address. At present, dialogue with local communities, including artists and craftspeople, to discuss how they might like to be involved more within the exhibition and activity programmes is seldom, if ever, on the art museum's agenda. Local artists and craftspeople also tend to be under-represented within exhibitions programmes, and the opportunities to be involved on a regular basis, appear to be limited by the structure and organisation of the existing exhibition programme.

Within the local community district (Palmerston North and Feilding) the last census figures (Statistics New Zealand, 2001, p.14) indicated that the population is experiencing a slight decline. Local newspapers have also reported the movement of some business interests to the larger centres, particularly Auckland. The continuation of such trends could result in our local cultural facilities, coming under pressure from council

rating and budget reviews. Within such a climate, all council funded organisations, including the cultural facilities could find themselves faced with more stringent accountability criteria. More importantly, this could result in diminishing budget allocations, depending on the perception, by council of how relevant they judge those organisations to be.

The exhibition programme of museums provides the axis around which all activities and interactions within the institution revolve. To argue, that without the curation of exhibitions, the existence of many museums would be impossible to sustain, is axiomatic from both a philosophical and economic viewpoint. The organisation and management of exhibitions, not only sustains the institution and its professional and general staff, but also provides the public profile of the museum within the local, regional, and national communities. Therefore, the planning, composition and curatorial leadership of the exhibition programme is of prime importance to all stakeholders of the institution.

In some museums the curatorship of exhibitions has also been changed and broadened. The traditional model of the single authoritative scholar-curator is still in practice, but other models including the curatorial team, the artist/curator and artists' interventions as well as community projects all occur (Greenberg, Ferguson, Bruce, & Nairne 1996). Thus the ideology and practice of curatorship is evolving.

Exhibition programme planning in many provincial art museums within New Zealand is in the author's view, problematic. The flexibility and creative opportunities directors and curators have in organising the calendar and contents of the programme seem to be constrained by a number of factors. For example, touring exhibitions circulate around the country and need to be juggled with other gallery bookings if they are to be accommodated to fit in with the touring calendar. There are also the expectations of the local community to host particular exhibitions at specific times of the year. Thus, the organisation of the exhibition programme can become more akin to a game of chess, rather than provide an opportunity to address some of the current challenges of relevance and community involvement that have been introduced and which face museums worldwide.

The aims of the present study

From the literature (Becker, 1982; Hein, 1991; Doering, 1992; Frank, 1992, 2000; Falk & Dierking, 1992; Worts, 1993), three issues have emerged as being fundamental to museum practice generally and central to this research within an art museum context. Firstly, who is visiting museums and why; secondly, what are visitors gaining from their experience; and thirdly, what factors contribute to the effectiveness of the museum's exhibitions and programmes in delivering the community based and educational mission of the museum.

This project also involves the researcher taking on the role of curator for a specific exhibition, in order to explore a possible museum praxis model, from first-hand experience, whilst working within a formal museum context. This is in line with the action research approach, and is considered an appropriate way to evaluate the potential for this methodology, to develop a model for art museums to consider, when working with their local communities.

The current study involves two phases: firstly, the creation of a community exhibition and the study of its development; and secondly, the study of visitors to the exhibition. The project also set out to test whether involving a broader range of participants from the local and wider community than are usually represented within an exhibition concept, consequently attracts a more diverse audience to the exhibition.

Thus, it is intended that this research will provide significant indicators of the audience profile, and their response to this specific exhibition, and lead to recommendations as to how staff in museum organisations might respond to some of the findings emerging from the research data and analysis. These findings may also contribute to the current debate concerning museum relevance, and the democratisation of art museum generally.

Research Questions

The research questions this thesis investigates were formulated with regard to the three issues identified in the aims of the study and also the action research methodology (AR) undertaken by the author. The latter is consistent with the role of the author as curator/project manager/researcher.

Four research questions were formulated:

1. Exhibition Audience

Who is the audience for a specific exhibition and what motivates such an audience to visit this exhibition?

2. Exhibition Reception

What does the audience gain from viewing a specific exhibition and did the audience understand the key messages conveyed by the exhibition?

3. Exhibition Effectiveness

What makes an effective exhibition?

4. Exhibition Creation

How can action research contribute to exhibition creation and enhance its outcomes?

These research questions provide a framework to develop, through evaluating an exhibition project, the concept of art museums exploring alternative ways of creating and curating exhibitions within their communities (p.1).

Research Design & Methodology

In considering a suitable research design, the research frameworks of Crotty (1998), and Morgan (1983), provided a starting point. Crotty identifies four elements that inform one-another in the research design and implies there is a natural progression from considering epistemological issues, to considering theoretical perspectives, then to developing methodologies, which lead to considering research methods. Morgan suggests a three-point framework, commencing with the researcher identifying their personal assumptions or underpinning paradigms and their preferred methodologies, before comparing these to the theoretical frameworks provided by the literature. Both approaches emphasize the importance of researchers applying a structured framework when selecting research strategies.

Having identified the initial aims of the research, the next step was to consider other factors suggested by Morgan (1983), and Crotty (1998), as having the potential to impact on the research design. There are a number of possible epistemological and

ontological positions for researchers to take. Using Crotty's terminology, these positions range from the positivist extreme of *objectivism*, which asserts that "the meaning and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such, apart from the operation of any consciousness", to *subjectivism*, where "meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object, but is imposed on the object by the subject" (Crotty, 1998, p.8). *Constructionism* advances a middle ground where "meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of the world" (p.8).

The researcher, in applying Morgan's approach, identified his own assumptions of learning, drawing on Bruner's (1990) philosophical position. This interpretive approach underpins the concept of meaning making that has found favour within museum discourses on the enrichment of visitor experience, and has become a key aspect of constructivist educational theory (Kuhn, 1962; Hein, 1991; Worts, 1993; Russell, 1995; Kinchloe, Slattery & Steinberg, 2000). A phenomenological dimension of constructivist methodology "stems from the view that the world and reality are not objective and exterior, but that they are socially constructed and given meaning by people" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 1991, p.24).

The social science research framework advanced by Doering (1992) identifies three different methodologies that are generally used in research of museum exhibitions and their evaluation: survey research, evaluation research, and informal research. Survey research is defined as "systematic, impartial, representative, theory based, quantitative, self-monitoring and replicable". Evaluation research is "the systematic application of social science research procedures to assessing the conceptualisation, design, implementation and utility of exhibitions, programmes or activities". (Doering, 1992, pp.70-71). Informal assessment is the third strategy, and refers to activities conducted by museum staff, to provide information "about the design, implementation and utility of exhibitions, programmes or activities". Informal assessment (IA) can also give information about visitors' characteristics and aspects of their behaviour, knowledge, opinions and attitudes. Such data provide valuable information specific to a particular site or institution. Often, IA provide the starting point for more detailed and systematic investigations. Accordingly IA does not usually meet the same criteria as survey or evaluation research (Doering, 1992, pp.70-71). IA has been selected as the appropriate strategy for this study because of its potential to inform the praxis of museum staff.

Action Research

Action Research (AR) provided an appropriate conceptual framework for the present study, which involved establishing collaborative partnerships with a variety of stakeholders, comprising individuals, community groups and organizations. Data was collected during key phases of this project. Action Research is a democratic form of research, intent on understanding and improving practice and socio-cultural situations. It was considered appropriate to the context of this study and suited the philosophical underpinnings and dynamics of the project, which extended over a period of six months.

Using AR as a conceptual framework also enabled the researcher to identify a constructivist approach, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data gathering methods, as the most appropriate for this research. This decision was based on two factors: Firstly, the researcher's affinity with the constructivist paradigm that multiple perceptions of reality exist, and that knowledge is constructed. And secondly, the nature and dynamics of the study, incorporating an action research methodology, in looking at the relationship between the creation and reception of a specific exhibition.

Action research methodologies were also considered appropriate for the nature and context of the study because the researcher was actively involved in initiating and curating the event. There was also a high degree of expectation by the stakeholders involved that the end result would need to be a successful and stimulating exhibition. The expectation of a positive outcome required the curator/researcher to have a 'hands-on' participatory role, at key times throughout the exhibition development process. The interpretive requirement of action research (AR) implies that the researcher gets involved "not simply as a participant observer, but as an active agent of change". AR provides a mode of enquiry that "diffuses" the "conventional differences between theory and practice" (Bryant, 1996, p.108). Therefore, for a museum considering itself a learning organisation AR provides curators with a suitable framework for more 'hands-on' projects, particularly those involving local communities.

Another distinction between AR and conventional research is that 'action' is involved at each stage of the process, which is cyclical rather than linear (refer to fig.5, p.48). This model has been further advanced as an 'action-in-reflection' spiral (Elliott, 1981; Schon, 1983; Carr & Kemmiss, 1986; McNiff, 1988; Winter, 1989), which is

particularly adaptable to museum practice. This will be discussed in the literature review (Chapter II, pp. 43-48).

Methodology

The researcher in this present study assumed the role of exhibition curator and facilitator, working independently, but within a museum setting, to coordinate a number of community groups and independent artists in creating a joint exhibition based on their interpretations of the mandala symbol. In the role of curator, it was intended to gather together a variety of participants from the community, involve them in an exhibition project, and as far as possible, and where appropriate, work closely with them during the production phases, in order to bring the exhibition to the public. This is not the usual role of the exhibition curator in a public art museum when curating an in-house exhibition.

Curators and art museums usually stand out-side the creative process of making art works for an exhibition when community artists and craftspeople are involved. Undertaking a process that involved close interaction with the artists contributing to the exhibition provided an ideal opportunity to trial a new model for museums to consider when working with local community groups.

This study involved the two distinct research phases; firstly of exhibition creation, and secondly of exhibition reception. Phase one involved a number of separate cycles of meetings, presentations, and workshops, as the researcher interacted with the various community groups, and artists, involved in the project. Although these were recurring cycles to some extent, each group or individual required a slightly different approach depending on the particular personalities, backgrounds or group dynamics involved.

Phase two came into operation once the exhibition opened. The research then focused on the exhibition visitors, in order to determine, who they were, how they came to be there, how they engaged with the exhibits, and their responses to the exhibition. This involved a range of methodologies commonly used by museums engaged in visitor research and exhibition praxis studies, including exhibition evaluation surveys (Bennett, 1991; Doering, 1992; Hood, 1992; Sudbury & Russell, 1995), observation and visitor tracking (Melton, 1972; Hood, 1991; Wizevich, 1993; Thompson, Bitgood et al, 1993) and informal interviews (Worts, 1993; Silverman, 1995). This approach provided a range

of qualitative and quantitative data that was complementary and would contribute to the robustness of this present study.

Exhibition Creation

There is some literature which documents an increasing number of artists' interventions inside museums and art museums, principally in museums overseas, for example, Fred Wilson's installations (see Putnam, J., 2001). However, despite an extensive literature search it seems that very little research has been done that places the artists' experience at the centre of attention when evaluating exhibition creation or reception. The stories behind the exhibition, involving the makers' personal experiences, perceptions or reflections, are seldom documented as an integral part of the exhibition creation process. Most often, only the art work itself counts. Rarely is the perspective of the artist as exhibit creator revealed, beyond the artists' statements which usually accompany an exhibition. Furthermore museums rarely document critical evaluations of the rationale for exhibitions programme or the processes in exhibition development.

Such evaluation could provide valuable information for museums seeking to develop greater relevancy and closer links to their communities. In this study the responses, perceptions and reflections of the group participants were recorded at key times during the project. In New Zealand to date, such evaluation research has occurred principally in relation to natural history or human history exhibitions (Lovis, 1992; Wizevich, 1993; McAdam, 1996).

Exhibition Reception Studies

Published visitor studies within New Zealand museums are rare (Donnelly, 1995, pp 6-10). But data related specifically to art museums in New Zealand are virtually non-existent, although some research has been undertaken on "non-users" of New Zealand museums and art galleries (McDermott Miller, 1996).

Te Manawa Art does keep a running record of visitor numbers, and has done so for a number of years. However, visitor numbers alone only provide a head count and do not reveal other valuable information, such as who the visitors are, where they are from, if they have been before or whether they are likely to return. Neither do they provide the richer texture of visitor response and interpretation of the exhibits, or the museum

experience. Questionnaires, visitor tracking and interviews were used in this study to find out who was attending the exhibition, why they came to be there, and gauge their responses to the exhibition.

The Site

Te Manawa is the new name for the recently ‘re-branded’ organisation previously known as The Science Centre & Manawatu Museum and Manawatu Art Gallery. Te Manawa is a regional charitable trust museum funded primarily by Palmerston North City Council, and is funded annually through rate revenues. New Zealand regional census figures (2001) indicate that more than 76,000 people live in the city. There are also a number of surrounding rural towns that serve this predominantly rural region, the largest being Feilding, with a population of around 13,600, which is located just 15 kilometres from the city. Both Palmerston North and Feilding recorded declining populations of -0.3% and -0.6% respectively in their average annual rate of population change from 1996 to 2001 (Statistics New Zealand, 2001).

Te Manawa Art, formerly the Manawatu Art Gallery, is sited adjacent to the museum and science centre components of Te Manawa. The name change occurred after this exhibition project was complete, therefore correspondence and questionnaires included within the appendices, includes reference to the former title.

Te Manawa Art has emerged from the grass roots of the community with its beginnings as an incorporated society of arts in 1956. The city council assisted the Manawatu Society of Arts and their fundraising efforts to open the Palmerston North Art Gallery in 1959. The gallery gained national attention as an innovative and lively institution in the 1960s when the Director, James Mack, established the Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art (McCredie, 1999). The gallery’s reputation gathered momentum in the 1970s and 1980s when re-named the Manawatu Art Gallery, to reflect the recognition of its wider regional significance. During this time, a new purpose built facility was constructed. The completion of the new gallery was the result of re-visioning by the director (Luit Bieringer), an innovative architectural design and a large amount of community and regional fundraising, involving artists, craftspeople, the wider public and business community. In an early interview (c.1974), Bieringer stated “Buildings and institutions are built to serve people...That’s why we are planning not just a gallery, but a

community centre, one that can appeal to a wide range of interests in everyone: one that can above all, be flexible enough to meet any changes that the future might bring” (McCreadie, 1999, p.114). The combined efforts of the regional community were then backed up by considerable financial input from the Palmerston North City Council, in order to complete the construction and fitting of the building.

Te Manawa Art mounts around twenty-five exhibitions a year within its five-gallery complex. In the financial year encompassing this project⁴, two thirds of these exhibitions were categorised as, curated ‘in-house’ by Te Manawa, with ‘hired-in’ exhibitions, comprising the rest. Of the two in-house ‘solo’ exhibitions, one featured the work of a local artist and the other a regional artist. A further five ‘group’ exhibitions were related to educational institutions within the city, and included the work of local or regional artists and crafts people, as well as current students. There were also six small short duration community exhibitions.

The Mission Statement of Te Manawa reads:

We will be an accessible place where ideas are expressed and exchanged. We will do this through the preservation, presentation and interpretation of art, science, and heritage, in order to increase our understanding of ourselves and our world.

(Te Manawa Strategic Plan, 2002/2003)

Te Manawa’s main goals are:

- ❑ *To provide innovative learning and recreation opportunities which challenge the communities’ perception of museums, art, science and heritage.*
- ❑ *To maintain visitor numbers through challenging, informative and exciting exhibitions and programmes.*
- ❑ *To optimize revenue earning opportunities.*

The “Activity Emphasis” of Te Manawa, includes providing “exciting and challenging lifelong learning, interactive and recreational experiences in art, science and heritage”. Service to education, the visual arts, enriching the community and encouraging visitors to the city are also included.

⁴ 1 July 2001 to 30 June 2002

(Palmerston North City Council Annual Plan, 2002/2003, p.111)

Revised Mission Statement

During the end phase of the writing of this thesis, Te Manawa management prepared a draft strategic plan to present to the city council, which included a revised Mission Statement, along with a number of 'Defining Commitments' covering the following aspects: Bicultural, Experiences, Learning, Heritage, Community, and Sustainability.⁵ There are a number of statements in the draft that represent a significant shift in emphasis from the former mission and goals. Of particular interest, in the context of this study, are the statements relating to the revised mission which will be highlighted in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

Exhibitions Policy

It is important for a museum that the exhibition programme reflects and gives expression to the principles embodied within their mission. Within the museum, staff look to the mission and main goals for guidance in determining the exhibition programme. Te Manawa does not have an exhibitions policy. Of particular interest in the context of this thesis is the policy and practice relating to community focused exhibitions. Since 1998 Te Manawa Life, the museum, has developed a series of community exhibitions under the rubric "Origins". These are small temporary exhibitions developed in tandem with representatives from ethnic groups in the Manawatu. Chilean, Indian, Chinese and African community members are among those featured to date. A member of staff co-ordinates and guides the project. No such parallel project, with such a distinct community focus, occurs in Te Manawa Art.

Limitations of the Study

This section outlines and discusses limitations relating to the theme, the site, the location, the scheduling of the exhibition and the collection of data. Exhibitions featuring the art works of groups of invited artists may be curated in several ways. These range from an open invitation to submit works of any description, to an invitation to submit works that relate to a specific media, concept or theme. This project involved the development of

⁵ Te Manawa Director- Catchpole Interview, 15 August, 2003

a thematic exhibition. In the context of this study this was a limitation that was necessitated in part by the requirement to present a concept to Te Manawa to enable the project to proceed. By taking this approach the ability of the participants to collaborate in the exhibition concept and development was constrained to some extent. However, the thematic approach, although acknowledged by the author as a limitation, did provide a focus for the participants, and aspects of the AR methodology that required comparisons to be made during the evaluation phases by the researcher and the participants. .

Due to the limited time and resources available to conduct visitor studies, the demographic data related to the reception of the exhibition was predominantly collected by means of voluntary questionnaires completed on site and within the exhibition space. Therefore, the audience samples represented within the survey were random and involved only visitors who visited this particular exhibition, rather than a wider and more statistically valid sampling of all visitors to Te Manawa Art. Consequently, some survey results involving frequency counts and cross-tabulation are not generalisable, but pertain to this study only. However, because the methodology also incorporated different cohorts (artists, craft-groups, gallery staff, visitors etc.) which provided a robust degree of triangulation in analysing the data, the overall visitor responses and patterns that the data revealed allow some interpretive conclusions to be made, and present implications that could apply to similar regional gallery contexts.

The study includes art gallery staff responses to the exhibition itself. However, no surveys were conducted with staff to establish prior attitudes and perceptions pertaining to their individual or collective approach, to either their own role within the organisation, or to the museum's role as a cultural organisation within the community. Although related to the present study, these issues are considered significant enough to warrant a separate research project focusing on the organisational culture of art museums.

While acknowledging the multitude of variables involved in creating and installing a community exhibition, this study focused on a distinct number of clearly defined elements of this process. In this exhibition project, the researcher was limited by several variables that may have influenced the final outcome, both as an exhibition and as a study. These included the timing and location of the exhibition within the Te Manawa Art complex. Arguably, given a different gallery location (larger and more flexible), the approach and expressive outcome of the various group works may have been quite

different. For example, two groups involved in the project were initially inspired to conceptualise and create 3-dimensional works, but were restricted to thinking traditionally (i.e. 2-D wall works) by the limited size of the gallery.

Also, the placement of the exhibition, in the only slot available within the exhibition calendar, was a further variable that was beyond the researcher's control. While this was not necessarily a limitation, the exhibition period encompassed the Christmas and New Year holiday period. This resulted in a particular audience demographic, involving a significant number of out-of-town and overseas visitors that may not have been as prevalent at other times of the year.

Preview of Chapters

The Literature Review in Chapter I outlines the cultural contexts influencing museum practice; visitor experience in relation to personal contexts; constructivist educational theory, meaning-making and learning in museums; the challenges facing museums; the New Zealand context; and research design approaches, introducing action research as an appropriate methodology for museum research.

Chapter II, Methodology in the Field, introduces the research methodology in the field involving a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The context and framework of the study, involving the two data collection phases of exhibition creation, and exhibition reception are explained. The background to phase one, the exhibition creation, is outlined and sets the scene for the timing, location and the funding of the exhibition.

Chapter III, Exhibition Concepts and Participants, presents the exhibition title, aims, brief, and exhibition messages. A justification of the exhibition theme is included, and the New Zealand participants, who included eight solo artists and four community craft groups, are introduced. A small number of international artists, featured on a purpose-designed, inter-active web-site within the exhibition, are also introduced and the reasons for their inclusion and the participatory nature of the site explained.

Chapter IV, Exhibition Development: Methodology in Action, details the research methodology in action during phase two of the action research, involving the various meetings, presentations, and workshops, with the four participant craft groups, and eight individual artists.

Chapter V, Exhibition Development Evaluation: The Participants, reports on the findings of research surveys, conducted with the artists, and the community craft groups, during the exhibition creation phase, and prior to the opening.

Chapter VI, Exhibition Reception Evaluation: Participants and Visitors, contains two parts and reports on the findings and analysis of the research, focusing on the reception of the exhibition, when opened to the public. Part One presents the response of the solo artists, craft groups, an extension workshop group and gallery staff. The data from these cohorts are recorded separately providing a degree of triangulation to the comparative evaluation. Part Two presents the data and analysis from three visitor questionnaires conducted throughout the exhibition period, providing the basis for an evaluation of the public perceptions and responses to the exhibition.

The final Chapter VII, Discussion and Conclusion contextualises the project and provides an interpretive discussion of the research questions outlined in the introduction. The research questions are also discussed in relation to findings resulting from the study, along with the implications for Te Manawa Art, and regional art museums generally. By way of a conclusion, models illustrating the development of particular theoretical concepts on the mission and cultural aspects of museum organisations introduced within the body of the thesis are also discussed along with other implications for art museums arising from the study.

The presentation of this thesis is discursive. It attempts to describe and analyse the often disjointed process of developing a community exhibition, and then proceeds to research and analyse responses to this exhibition. In both areas the multiplicity of viewpoints and experiences provide a complex field for analysis. In attempting to make sense of the many variables, the thesis works towards offering a glimpse of both the motivation of, and gains made by, art museum audiences during exhibition visits. It also begins to unravel what makes effective exhibitions.

Chapter I

Literature Review

Introduction

In line with the identified research questions, this chapter will cover the following areas: firstly, the concept of culture will be discussed in relation to the museum context to provide a setting for related aspects; secondly, exhibition creation forms the central nexus for museum culture and this will be discussed as an integral aspect of this section; thirdly, museum audiences are discussed in terms of the personal, social, physical, and cultural context of visiting, responding and learning within a museum context; fourthly, the effectiveness of museums is explored in terms of their cultural contribution and their relationships to their communities and publics; fifthly, the New Zealand context is reviewed and the paucity of relevant literature is highlighted; and lastly, action research is presented as an appropriate model for art museum research.

Museums and Cultural Contexts

There are many interpretations of the term culture. In the context of this study, which seeks to understand better the complexity of the relationship between art museum exhibitions and their audiences, it is an important to acknowledge the significance of culture to museum practice, as being both an external and internal, social and organizational phenomena. In this section, these aspects will be discussed separately, but the issue of cultural context will recur throughout this chapter and will be seen to be more closely related within a museum context than is first apparent.

Bourdieu's (1969) research on art gallery visitor patterns was instrumental in developing his theory of habitus, which suggests that cultural barriers explain the use and non-use cultural institutions. This theory posits that educational differences arise as a result of systematic cultural advantage and disadvantage. The children of the less educated tend to exclude themselves from school as soon as possible because of their inability to decipher the school code. Significantly, they perceive this to be their own choice. Non-visitors also perceive their self-exclusion from museums as their own choice, rather than as the result of social disadvantage.

Museum culture reinforces the sense of exclusion for some and inclusion for others. Museum exhibits are a particular form of communication – a code of display, which requires decoding by visitors if it is to be understood. Bourdieu's (1984) studies of taste, based on surveys, interviews, and ethnographic studies, found that working class, middle class, and upper class people prefer different forms and styles of art. However, the relationship between socialisation and personal preference, far from being a simple correlation, takes into account and analyses the factors influencing the 'ways' of having aesthetic taste.

The process of creating socially valued "symbolic capital" in the form of art can only be interpreted meaningfully (on an epistemological basis) by including the associated social practices of both artist and audience. Thus, Bourdieu analyses both "the ways of having aesthetic taste" and the qualitative meaning of interpreting art (Bourdieu, 1984, p.506). Furthermore, he argues that both the conscious use of art and style as signifiers of status and the unconscious conditioned behaviour of one's habitus must be taken into account in an analysis of status groups. Social status, at any point in an individual's or group's life- journey, is represented in a three-dimensional model comprising components of economic, social, and cultural capital. Central to Bourdieu's analysis of the arts in society is the concept that art and the appreciation of art become a form of symbolic capital for defining status.

King (1992) relates culture to issues of learning and class, drawing on four areas of literature (anthropological, psychological, educational, and sociological) to propose an interdisciplinary perspective of culture. She broadly defines culture as encompassing "patterns of meaning, reality, actions, and decision making that are shared by and within social collectives" (p.37). Culture emerges in an organized form from "the collective creativity of human experiences and shared interpretations of that experience as communicated within specific groups" (P.37). Cultural transmission occurs in two forms- inculturation, where traditions are passed from one generation to the next – and acculturation, where cultural patterns or new knowledge is passed on from those who know to those who do not know. Museums represent distinct organisational cultures residing within larger local, regional, and national cultures, and are in a unique position to influence the acculturation of community culture.

Herskovits (cited in King, 1992) outlines three paradoxes to King's definitions. The first is that although culture is a "universal" human experience, "each local or regional manifestation of it is unique" (p. 37). Second, although culture is stable, it is also changing continuously. And third, although humans are embedded within cultural contexts that greatly influence our lives, they are seldom conscious of the fact.

Cartwright (1999) asserts that cultural values are the key to the effective management of organisations for their continuous improvement. This view also posits that culture⁶ is a fundamental evolutionary process. The development of the human mind through cultural learning has historically been a key factor in a survival strategy that favoured the evolution of those cultures best adapted to survive. Maslow's (1987) motivational needs theory for survival, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualisation of the individual, is encompassed in this developmental aspect of culture.

Culture strongly influences human motivation, for better or worse, which is highly significant for organisations in terms of contributing to institutional and personal quality of life. Therefore, Cartwright advances that cultural awareness is the key to people management and their personal development, and stresses the importance of defining a culture in terms that can be measured. Drawing on the models of Beattie (1966) and Schein (1992), Cartwright defines culture as "an organized body of people who share the same goals, beliefs and values" (p.11). Furthermore, culture can be measured in terms of the effect it has on motivation.

In order to address the one-way conversations that museums, particularly art museums, have been accused of having with their audiences, Perin (1992) proposes a cultural theory of exhibition representation and reception for museums to adopt. She contends that it is museum practitioners who predominantly initiate 'conversations' with audiences and activate the 'communicative circle'. Further, exhibition makers tend to conduct their conversations through the 'syntax' of objects, and although audiences may 'hear' the messages, they rarely get the opportunity to respond and thus contribute to the communicative circle.

Perin suggests that exhibition messages are constructed as much by visitors' interpretations, as by exhibition curators and designers. Therefore, if exhibition makers

⁶ The origin of the term culture is from Latin and relates to the soil- literally, it means to grow, to produce and to cultivate or improve the mind (Cartwright, 1999).

took into consideration the diversity of audiences' understandings and misunderstandings, generated by exhibition reception, they could enhance the opportunity for a more fruitful dialogue and collaboration. Thinking of exhibition representation and reception as cultural processes offers museums a means to repair the present rift in the communicative circle.

The practices and politics of museum organisations underpin the selection of knowledge and the presentation of ideas and images (Karp, 1992). These are enacted within a power system that classifies and defines peoples and societies. Thus the power to represent can reproduce structures of belief and experience which give understanding to cultural difference. The difference between the civil and political aspects of society is an issue of power and its use. Whereas political society exercises coercion and control, civil society creates hegemony through evolving cultural and moral systems that give legitimacy to the existing social framework. Thus the dual role of civil society involves a commitment (intellectual and moral) to the way society is ordered and governed and to the provision of a forum within which to contest "assertions about who has the right to control and define the different identities in society" (Karp, 1992, p.4).

The current practices dominating exhibition making, involve the museum professionals "speaking for audiences" rather than "hearing audience voices" (Perin, 1992, p.194). This leads to museums relying on myths about audiences, which in turn guides their practice. Perin acknowledges that these myths may not be entirely unfounded, but reflect extensive personal experience and professional observations. However, false assumptions can be made that exhibition messages will be received as intended. Perin suggests that curators and designers should be listening to audience voices throughout the exhibition development process, and based on these dialogues interrogate themselves about exhibition content and form. This process, she contends will open the "hermetic seal" (p. 194) on their discourses and involve the discourses of others in the communicative circle. It would also ensure the integrity and quality of the exhibition creation process and be more inclusive of audience perspectives.

Exhibition Reception

Exhibitions and exhibits⁷ need to be attractive, interesting, and engaging to visitors. The degree to which exhibits engage and inform the visitor, is referred to as the “holding power” of the exhibit (Falk& Dierking, 1992, p.70). What engages visitor attention may be influenced by the media, colour, shape, size, or form of the object, the lighting, the label-copy, typography, size etc. or by the visitor’s own criteria. It is generally accepted that although museum visitors come with a broad range of agendas, most come to specifically look at objects.

Engaging the visitor with exhibition design and layout, including labels, presents a constant challenge to museum professionals. Numerous visitor studies over the last sixty years have confirmed that despite the best efforts of staff to assemble sequential exhibitions that present information chronologically or ordered according to some other criteria, many visitors create their own random sequence, often omitting elements. Therefore, the holding power of exhibits within an exhibition is frequently random, and can result in non-sequential visitor movement and variable time periods spent with exhibits (Falk & Dierking, 1992).

Exploring aspects of the unique nature of individual experience, Frank (1992) invokes contemporary psychology to suggest that the “souvenirs” that people take away from museums are “fragmentary mental representations”(p.56). Therefore, he suggests that exhibit developers create an environment that assists visitors to “construct optimal representations” (p.56).

To provide a framework for this construction, Frank incorporates Golbeck’s taxonomy of environments as a model for classification and terminology. This pre-emptive attempt to classify space has two broad environmental categories that can also be applied to museum environments; Firstly, structural features, which are objective, discreet, and measurable; Secondly, organisational features, focusing on the relationship between the elements within a particular environment. Both categories are comprised of three specific characteristics:

1. Structural features: The most important structural feature is the *degree of differentiation* within an environment. ‘Landmarks’ establish this differentiation therefore their number and type are extremely significant. The saliency of landmarks in meeting a

⁷ Displays or objects within an exhibition.

variety of needs for different target groups also contributes to the degree of differentiation. *Physical boundaries* provide bounded spaces that help visitors locate and encode objects within that environment. *Barriers*, further divide space into sections that can contribute to the structural features and contribute to exhibition design and effectiveness.

2. Organisational features: *Clustering*, involves grouping objects with similar attributes, while *orientation* refers to the arranging of items in familiar and meaningful ways. *Saliency*, refers to how noticeable an object is. These characteristics all contribute to the schema a visitor constructs within an exhibition. For example, if exhibits or items are arranged in meaningful ways, then visitors who are familiar with the code remember them more and “if an item violates a schema strongly it will be noticed” (Frank, 1992, p.64).

Zolberg (1990) puts a case for social scientists to develop an interpretive framework for the sociology of art in light of the mounting literature supporting the “socially constructed nature of art, cultural institutions, artists and publics” (Zolberg, 1990, xi). In this view a work of art is taken as a “synecdoche,”⁸ representative of a “total social experience” (p.80) rather than being seen as an isolated object. Furthermore, within this framework the meaning of art may be altered by future social definitions, rather than being considered “coextensive” (p.81) and being perceived in the same way from one period or generation to the next. Therefore this form of research provides a more sociological analysis, rather than aesthetic analysis of visual art.

A phenomenological approach is advanced by Becker (1982) who emphasises the importance of the audience’s contribution to art, by considering “the entire process through which it is made and re-made whenever someone experiences or appreciates it” (Becker, 1982, cited in Zolberg, 1990, p.153). Becker also examines the socially constructed nature of art by focusing on the labels associated with art and non-art, fine art, popular art, art and craft, etc. However, he points out that there are numerous examples of artists and craftspeople crossing the boundaries in order to re-orientate themselves, commercially, aesthetically, or conceptually. Picasso’s painted ceramic pots provide an example of a prolific painter and sculptor finding inspiration and motivation within a traditional craft. A change in media and discipline alters the nature of the work produced. Furthermore, these objects are not inherently art, or craft, until defined as such by others,

⁸ A part is made to represent the whole or vice versa.

i.e. “social actors, and groups, made up of practitioners, spokesmen and influential members of the public” (Zolberg, 1990, p.154).

Becker’s (1982) interpretation of art diffuses the distinction between artist and audience. In his view, both contribute to the creative process. Thus, exhibition reception is viewed as a potentially creative experience. However Zolberg, while acknowledging this “consumption as production” view of art, is critical of Becker’s oversight of Bourdieu’s wider considerations involving “the symbolic use of cultural codes by audiences”, and the related social factors that give rise to them (p.155).

Museum Audiences

Schuster(1993) presents a summary of findings from surveys undertaken in art museums in the United States and Canada. His analysis demonstrates that the demographic composition of museum visitors in both countries is very similar (DiMaggio, Useem & Brown, 1970; McCaughy, 1984). The composition of the visitor cohort was significantly different from the composition of the total population. The visitor cohort was more highly educated (over 50 % with a post-secondary education in Canada), having higher incomes and including more professional occupations. Women also slightly outnumber the men in art gallery audiences.

Participation studies are a relatively recent development in analysing museum publics. The local population is sampled rather than the museum audience. This gives an insight into the characteristics of non-visitors as well as those who do participate in museum activities. These studies identify the participation rate as the percentage of survey respondents who report that they have engaged in a particular activity in a specified period of time. Thus, participation rates can indicate the proportion of particular groups in a population that are visitors.

A range of variables such as income, occupation, age, gender, race, and regional location can provide revealing demographic data linked to participation rates. Schuster (1993) reports that despite differences with international studies relating to definitions and categories, the participation rates overall are remarkably consistent. For example, between 20% to 25% of the adult population participate in cultural activities by attending art museums. Apart from being a relatively low level of participation, this level is surprisingly consistent across international studies.

Barnicoat (1995), on her study tour to USA and Canada, found a move by fine arts museums to provide a context for exhibits through the use of experimental labeling and providing historical references and timelines. Other voices such as artists and community members are supplementing the curator's voice in text materials. This is achieved by working collaboratively with the community and establishing advisory groups that contribute to programme development. Museums are increasingly seeking responses from visitors about the types of exhibitions they want to see and creating programmes to meet this demand. Target audiences (African American, senior citizens, disabled, teachers etc.) are also being increasingly provided for by museums with a community focus and an awareness of the importance to develop future audiences. Barnicoat found that museums generally had not seriously considered the problem of widening their audience, nor encouraging first-time visitors to return. Staff also thought that they had no answers to the problem.

Other strategies Barnicoat found included off-site presentations, and the marketing of museums as family destinations. However, the issues of audience demographic composition, community involvement and target audiences have also highlighted the educational role of the museum and learning within a museum context.

Museum Audiences and Learning

Although cautioning museums to consider very carefully what they mean by the term education, Tesconi (1992) considers that museums would enhance their educative capacity if they joined forces with teachers, scholars, universities, and libraries, in a mutually supportive arrangement. In his view, museums need teachers to develop a range of strategies and experiences (instructive-knowledge building, self actualisation, and disruption), to provide interactive and reflective opportunities for "educative moments" to occur (p.17). He also draws on existentialist philosophy to support his view that educative moments occur when our "psychic containers" (Barrett, cited in Tesconi 1992, p.15) fuse an encounter or experience with meaning-making.

A constructivist learning philosophy posits that knowledge is constructed rather than transmitted. Individuals make sense of the world by constructing meaning from their experiences. In this view, meaning-making is learning, and there is no other way to learn. The term meaning-making is applied to both learning theory and epistemology (Hein,

1991; Worts, 1993; Johassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999). The significant implications of this view are twofold. In thinking about learning, the focus becomes the learner, rather than the topic, subject or lesson; and no knowledge exists independently from “the meaning attributed to the experience by the learner, or community of learners” (Hein, 1991, p.2).

Hein argues that accepting the constructivist position requires following a pedagogy that provides learners with the opportunity to “interact with sensory data” and to “construct their own world” (1991, p.2). Hein further proposes a number of principles of learning to support constructivist thinking that include the position that learning is an active, social, contextual, and mental activity that requires time and a knowledge base to build on. Motivation is also considered a key factor in learning. Hein also suggests that even though a constructivist learning theory is counter to traditional museum practice, the profession should reflect on and incorporate its principles into exhibition and programme development.

Figure 2.
The Contextual Model of Learning

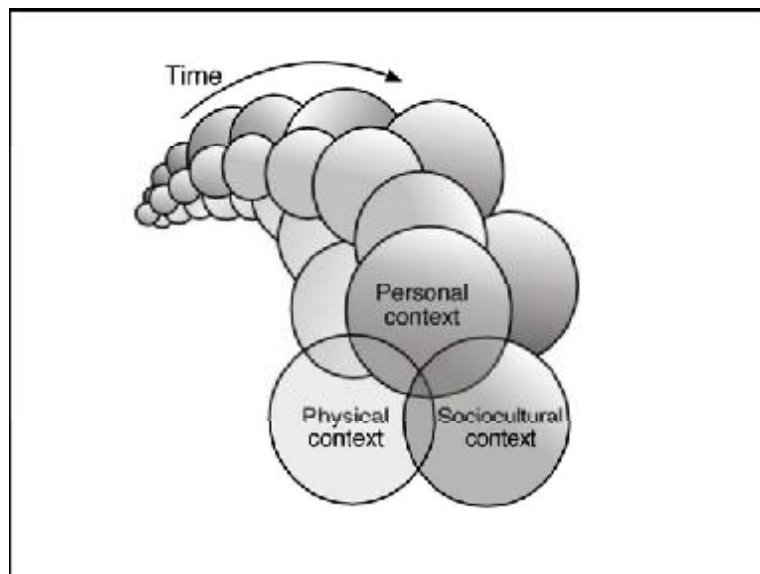


Figure adapted from Falk, J. H. & L. D. Dierking. *Learning from museums: Visitor experiences and the making of meaning*.

Falk & Dierking (1992, 2000), argue the case for a museum gestalt⁹ encompassing the visitor's perspective. Their Interactive Experience Model, more recently termed the Contextual Model of Learning (www.ilinet.org: 7 July 2001), recognises the unique complexities of the museum experience as well as the similarities and differences among museums and their visitors. The museum visit is conceptualised as an experience involving the interaction of three separate but interrelated contexts: the personal, social and physical.

This model proposes that these contexts can be visualised as a three-dimensional set of three interacting spheres (figure 2). The size of the spheres is variable depending on the visitor perceptions at any given moment. The revised Contextual Model also includes time as a dimension so that a visitor's museum experience can also related to the larger context of community and social life. Falk & Dierking argue that this model is an advance on the limited way that most museum professionals have traditionally viewed the museum experience. This has commonly meant placing an emphasis on the exhibition design aspects (layout, lighting, copy, labels, etc.) while overlooking the social context of the visitor's experience. Significant oversights can occur if only two contexts are considered, or if there is an incomplete understanding of a particular context and this will impact on the effectiveness of the exhibition message.

In this model, all three contexts contribute significantly to a museum visitor's experience. However, the significance of each context may vary depending on the particular situation. Furthermore, although the three contexts can be considered separately, they function as an integrated whole and need to be viewed in relation to the wider context of a person's life.

Personal Context

Visitor and non-visitor research indicates that the key factors in determining visitor behaviour appear to be dependent on demographics, i.e. age, education, income, race, previous museum experience, social responsibilities – visiting with family, guests, relatives or alone, personal interests and preferred leisure-time activities (Falk & Dierking, 1992 p.23). Therefore, personal context provides an indicator and predictor of museum

² According to Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, a "gestalt" is a "structure or configuration of physical, biological, or psychological phenomena so integrated as to constitute a functional unit with properties not derivable from its parts in summation."

attendance. Conversely, knowing a person is a regular museum visitor may provide insights into their likely education, background and interests.

Visitor expectations contribute to the personal context and are continually defined and refined by museum visiting. For frequent visitors “every visit clarifies the scope and potential sequence of the next visit” (p.26). First-time visitors also bring definite expectations based on some previous experience, contact (a school trip, movie or TV show) or conversation, rather than direct experience. Occasional visitors are similar to first time visitors in their expectations.

Word-of-mouth appears to be the most significant influence in attracting visitors to museums. Adams’ research (cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.28) over an eight year period in one museum indicated that between two thirds and three quarters of all visitors¹⁰ learned about and decided to visit the museum based on word-of-mouth. Similar research in a large number of other museums, has confirmed the significance of ‘word-of-mouth’, and also found that other forms of publicity accounted for less than twenty per cent of visits (Falk & Dierking, 1992).

Hooper-Greenhill (1991, 1994) draws on market research to support the use of qualitative research in museums to identify personal needs within a museum context. As well as museums being relevant to their audience, she advocates gathering the perceptions held by non-visitors and reconsidering established practice in light of this information. Focus groups, made up of first-time visitors, are being used for collecting this data. Museum researchers with expertise in this form of data collection facilitate open discussion with the participants about their visiting experiences. A key finding has been that many first time visitors hold perceptions derived from previous museum visits sometime ago and are surprised how different the experience is now. Hooper-Greenhill (1991, 1994) reports that many non-art museums are now using their collections to create exhibits with links to their communities. They are supporting and facilitating a range of learning styles, by incorporating multi-media and interactive components to encourage learning through exploration and discovery. Art museums, she suggests, should follow suit and shift their focus away from increasing visitor numbers to establishing quality experiences for target groups of visitors.

¹⁰ Most were first time visitors, fewer were occasional and a negligible number were frequent visitors.

Social Context

Families visiting museums make up a significant number of all visitors. Families are cross-generational and have differing expectations and experiences as well as a range of social and cognitive attributes. Adults visiting frequently (i.e. more than four times a year), tend to come on their own, rather than in an organised group or outing. Falk & Dierking (1992, p.37) suggest that “the visitor’s personal context is perhaps the single greatest influence on the visitor’s experience and perhaps the most important manifestation of the personal context is the visitor’s agenda”. The significance of this observation for museum practice cannot be over stated when considering the museum’s potential to create meaningful museum learning experiences.

Visitors’ agendas are shaped more by direct personal experience and knowledge and their expectations are related to what they know the museum has to offer (Falk & Dierking, 1992). With these visitors, an effective feed-back loop has been established through frequent visits, and they keep returning because they find museum visits reinforce a positive perception of the museum as a rewarding and enjoyable place to visit.

Visitor studies indicate that most visitors come to the museum as part of a social group (such as families, friends, clubs etc.) and that much of their attention within the museum is taken up by group interaction. Research in the early 1980s found that the typical family group is likely to spend 15-20 % of their visit time interacting as a family and an additional 2-5% involved with other people (Falk & Dierking, 1992). The social context includes “the questions and discussions generated by looking at exhibits and reading labels as well as the conversations, glances, and touches that are totally unrelated to the museum” (p.45). Social context research stimulated a wide variety of visitor studies in different types of museum settings (Lakota, 1975 - family groups and adults; Rosenfeld, 1978 – family group behavior in a zoo; Diamond, 1979 - adult/child groups in a science museum; Koran, 1984 - attention & curiosity in museum learning; Taylor, 1986 - behaviour, interests & informal education; Benton, 1986 - family interactions; Hensel, 1987 - communication patterns of conversation; Falk, 1988 - predicting visitor behaviour ; Dierking, 1989 - parent/ child interaction; Silverman, 1990 - adults in art museums, cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992).

Most of the research, until recently, has involved family studies, rather than other group dynamics and although the studies have been conducted in a diverse range of

museum settings using very different assumptions, all conclude that museums are predominantly social environments, particularly for family groups (Falk & Dierking, 1992). Other influences, apart from the immediate family or group, have also been found to influence visitor behaviour, for example, modeling theory. This strategy has been used by researchers, to alter visitor behaviour, encouraging them to engage with exhibits, by role modeling appropriate interactive responses to exhibits (Koran & associates, cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.51).

Physical Context

Research in a variety of museum settings has given consistent and relatively predictable results for the attention patterns of adults in family groups. Three typical patterns of visitor behaviour were identified depending on whether they were first-time, occasional, or frequent visitors (Falk & Dierking, 1992, pp.58-62).

The patterns emerged from visitor studies that categorised the typical museum visit into four phases: Orientation, Intensive Looking, Cruising, and Leave-taking. Melton (cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.61) proposed that object satiation caused museum fatigue. Its onset is likely to accompany phase three i.e. Cruising. First-time and occasional visitors tended to move through each of these phases, resulting in museum fatigue. Frequent visitors however, displayed a two-phase pattern, involving intensive looking and leave-taking and invoked their previous museum experiences to exclude the orientation and cruising phases of the visit. Organised guided tour groups, although influenced by the museum environment, also tended to follow a two-phase pattern involving intensive looking and listening over a long period, followed by a short period of cruising in their free time.

Human behaviour within museums has been found to be predictable. Behavioural studies by Barker & Wright, (1955, cited in Falk & Dierking 1992, p.64), demonstrated that behaviour could generally be predicted more accurately from assessing the physical and social environment rather than by knowing individual characteristics. They termed these physical/social characteristics “behaviour settings” (p.65), and found that different types of museums elicit different types of responses from visitors, therefore providing one way to conceptualise how people are influenced by physical space. Research has found that art museums along with history and natural history museums are traditionally seen as

settings in which to see rare valuable works, where one looks but does not touch and where voices are kept low. By contrast, in science centers, children's museums and some other less formal museums where a hands-on interaction with the exhibits is encouraged, visitors are predictably more casual and relaxed, talk louder and are more spontaneous (Falk & Dierking, 1992).

Interestingly, the research has also indicated that visitors to traditional museum settings can become confused in adjusting to an altered setting when the museums try to incorporate participatory and interactive experiences into their exhibits. In the author's view, The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, provides a clear example of a contemporary museum that combines both sorts of experiences for visitors, by the successful manipulation and design of the interior spaces, that send clear messages. For example, the interactive spaces are distinctly designed and coloured, appealing to the younger visitors, while other exhibits and spaces tend to take a more formal approach, depending on the exhibition programme.

Labels can be simple and basic giving details of the title, artist, medium, size and date of the work. More comprehensive labels can include background information about the artist or an artist statement. Additional labels can also put the art into a context and explain how the work fits into a particular genre, or relates to an aspect of art history. There are a number of controversial issues concerning exhibit labels. Extensive research indicates that labels generally receive scant attention from visitors. Falk (1980) found that over ninety per cent of visitors ignored the labels and that those that did notice them, only looked at them for a few seconds. However, it seems that most visitors read some of the labels, if they are provided. The legibility of labels is determined by a number of factors: font, type size, contrast (e.g. background colour), line spacing, lighting, placement and installation (e.g. eye level/ angled/ floor level), (Wolf & Smith, 1993).

Visitor attention studies have also identified a "bimodal" pattern in label reading, which reveals that most visitors do not read labels and some visitors read most of the labels (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.71). Betchel (1967, cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.73) considers that the enjoyment of the exhibition is the criterion for time spent or not spent, and no average assessment of visitor attention is valid. Similar patterns have been observed in both static and participatory exhibits, where visitors are inclined to interact with the exhibit initially and only to refer to labels later for information or assistance.

Formative evaluation studies by Russell (1995, cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992), revealed that one third of the visitors to a ceramic exhibition had not referred to any of the information labels within the exhibition. Discussion of this finding did lead to some minor changes to the label presentation by the exhibition developers.

Museum Effectiveness and Outcomes

Skramstad (1996) considers that museums of the future will have to address a number of public expectations if they are to remain relevant. Although acknowledging that they contribute something special to their community, he issues a strong challenge to museums to measure the value of what it does and to communicate this clearly. The touchstone of such measures should be located in the mission statement and in the future these are going to include not only reference to what a museum does but also describe “the outcomes of its actions and a sense of value that this outcome has” within the wider community (Skramstad, 1996, p.38). Implicit within this challenge, is the need for museums to identify the unique and special nature of their work and its ‘value’ in contributing to peoples’ lives. Further, he suggests there is little point in having a museum, unless it can make such claims.

Visitor experiences are a crucial component of a museums’ “specialness” (p.38) and involve a range of aesthetic, recreational and social needs. Thus, in Skramstad’s view, a museum’s specialness, is defined by the “focused authenticity of the recreational experience” rather than the uniqueness of their collection (p.38).

The authority of museums is another key factor in defining specialness. If a museum has no special perspective, resource or knowledge, then how can it claim to be special? Another fundamental expectation Skramstad identifies is “connectedness” (p.39), which is listening to and working alongside the community, as well as being electronically connected to other audiences and museums, in order to develop stronger links to its users, through dialogue and feedback. With these fundamentals in place, Skramstad suggests that the public expectation of trustworthiness will strengthen and grow. In his view, trustworthiness is the most important quality for museums to nurture within the community.

Conceptual Frameworks & Meaning-Making

Visitors arrive at museums with conceptual frameworks based on their own knowledge and experience. They read labels to either confirm their own conceptual frameworks or “determine an appropriate conceptual framework if their own proves inadequate” (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.74). Frequent visitors are more likely to have a frame of reference that corresponds with that of the exhibition creators, while this is less likely for occasional visitors. This has implications for the contents of labels, such as the tone of language used and the implicit messages and information presented.

The implicit and explicit messages of labels are problematic. Falk & Dierking (1992, p.72) argue that most museum visitors (adults or children) relate to exhibitions on a concrete rather than abstract level. However, many exhibitions and exhibits often present abstract ideas and concepts. Consequently they suggest that exhibits and labels would be more comprehensible (and also engaging) if concrete information preceded abstract ideas and if all messages were “explicitly stated”.

The concept of meaning-making, which focuses on the entire museum visitor experience, has been adopted by a number of researchers (Worts, 1993(a); Silverman, 1995; Tesconi, 1992; Rounds, 2002). The origin of this paradigm is linked to the re-conceptualisation of social theories based on the antipositivism of interpretive or hermeneutic analysis which asserts the aim of this analysis is to understand social events, social processes, and social phenomena, rather than seeking scientific proof entirely with statistical data (Zolberg, 1990). Brunner (1990) contends that we learn from experiencing phenomena (objects, activities, events, processes) and interpreting those experiences drawing on what we already know and reasoning and reflecting about them. Brunner was the first to term this interpretive process meaning-making, which has since become the term adopted by constructivist learning theorists previously outlined (p.31), to explain the concept of learning.

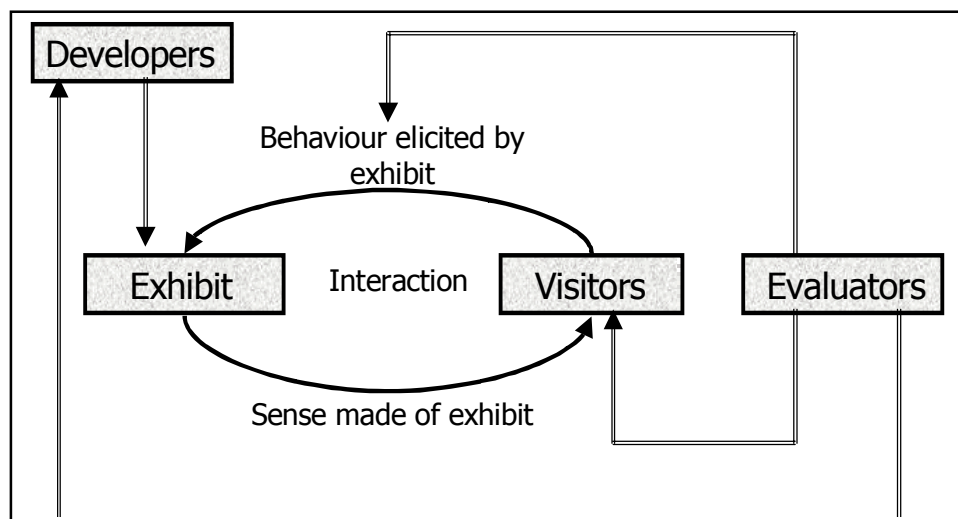
Worts (1993b) considers meaning-making is the visitor centred half of the creative process of experiencing and personalizing art works. Based on audience research that explored the wide varieties of visitor experiences, Worts’ team approach, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (involving educators, curators and designers), has set out to develop a range of interpretive strategies aimed at improving exhibition techniques. They are based on the “idiosyncratic meaning-making” of visitors (p.48). As well as creating different

types of gallery space with space, colour and scale variations, computers, audio and interactive labels were also integrated to increase enjoyment and help visitors make sense of the exhibits. Worts' research revealed a strong desire by people to see themselves reflected in their visits to museums. He suggests integrating individual visitor responses into the exhibition as an interpretive strategy which may subsequently encourage other visitors to participate (p.48).

Russell (1995) adopts a constructivist view of learning within the context of interactive museums for developing and evaluating exhibits. This view also assumes that visitors will tend to make their own meanings from the information on offer. Learning outcomes are the result of an interaction between a person's prior knowledge, and the new learning experience made available by the museum. According to Russell, the outcomes of such interactions within open-ended exhibits, is "neither totally idiosyncratic nor unpredictable" (p.14). Although the objective is to enhance a visitor's understanding of the exhibit's content, expectations with regard to learning outcomes should be considered as probabilities only. There are no certainties. The quality of the interactions is also understood as being as much in the hands of the visitor as of the exhibition developer.

Figure 3.

The feed-back loop: the formative evaluation process linking visitors experiences with exhibition development. (Based on Russell's model, 1995, p.17).



Russell advances three principles that developers of interactive exhibits should attempt to embrace. The first is to attract visitor's interest and actively engage and motivate them. The second is to prioritise visitor preferences and needs and incorporate them into exhibition presentation and activities and the third is to avoid making exhibits that could be misconstrued by visitors, adding to, or reinforcing, their misconceptions.

To evaluate the nature of learning experiences within interactive environments, Russell identifies two broad groups of techniques; behavioural and phenomenological. Behavioural techniques help evaluators extract meaning from collected data, such as tracking and observational checklists. Phenomenological techniques involve visitors in reflecting on and recording responses to their experiences. Interviews and questionnaires can provide this qualitative feedback. Russell considers the two approaches to data collection as complementary and, providing a more complete account of visitor experience. A feed-back loop (see fig 3) shows the relationship between the visitor experience, evaluation data methods and the feedback of information to exhibit developers.

Demographic information, Russell suggests, can also be included to provide interesting comparisons of visitor populations between exhibitions and neighbouring museums and identify their needs. Duration of visit is another descriptive data variable that can provide useful prescriptive information for future exhibition development (p.20).

Senge (1990, 1994, 2000) has also been a major philosophical and practical contributor to constructivist learning models. Senge's reconceptualisation of a business culture comprised of 'learning organisations' (p.11), and his introduction of the five learning disciplines, to improve business culture from the ground up, has recently been collaboratively adapted for use within an educational context.

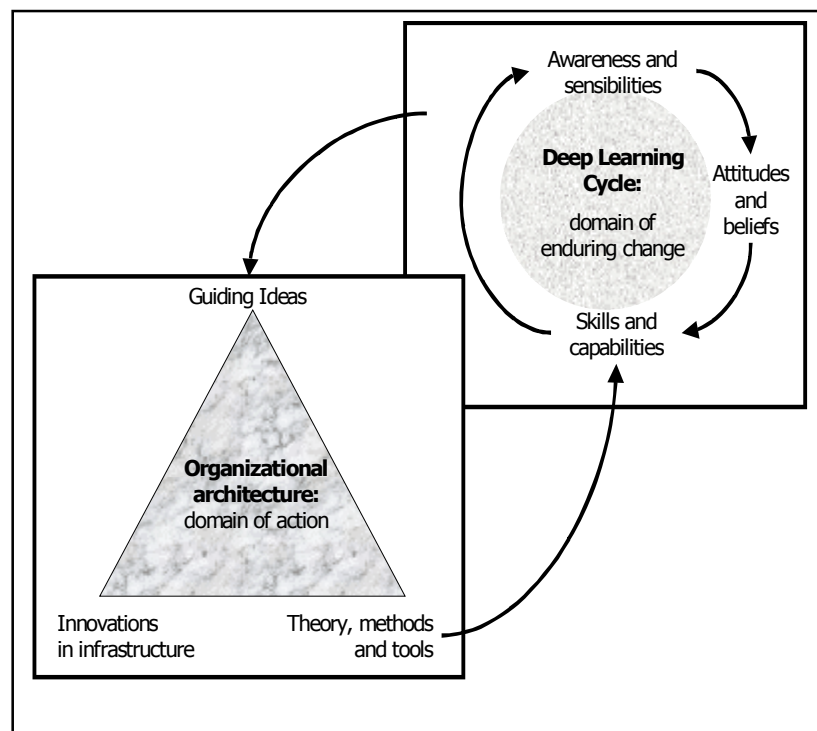
The five learning disciplines (systems thinking, mental models, personal mastery, shared vision, and team building and dialogue) differ from other management disciplines in that they are personal disciplines. Each has to do with how people think, what people truly want and how people interact and learn with one another. Senge considers a discipline to be a body of theory and technique that must be studied and mastered, to be put into practice. In this sense, to practice the disciplines is to be a life-long learner. Just as the individual can never say they have arrived, neither can an organisation claim to have become a learning organisation. Senge considers that deep learning cycles represent the

interrelated potential for change within individuals, which is also embodied in group cultures. Furthermore, learning occurs when new skills and capabilities, new awarenesses and sensibilities and new attitudes and beliefs reinforce each other (see Fig. 4).

Within an educational context, Senge's model for organisational cultural change is significant, in that some school cultures actively stimulate and promote learning, while others tend to hinder it (Arbuckle, 2000). Culture within educational organisations, including museums, as with individuals, is deeply rooted and is perceived as the most enduring aspect. Personal attitudes, values, skills, family and social backgrounds, and life experiences are embodied within a culture. Influencing an organisational culture in a sustainable manner is consequently somewhat problematic.

Figure 4.

Showing the relationship between individual and group cultural change, and the domain of action, within an organisational culture.



(Figure based on model in Senge, 2000, p.26)

Senge's model (see Fig. 4) indicates that action – the policies, deliberate practices, rules, and channels of authority, can be purposely designed around learning. This tends to initiate a deep learning cycle within the individuals in the organisation. Thus, new practices and approaches are initiated by a variety of new experiences arising out of structural change. In this model, understanding the relationship between structure and culture provides the basis for influencing cultural change. Senge suggests that although changes in the deep learning cycle can be profound and even irreversible, they are difficult to initiate. The triangular domain of action however, is less enduring but more tangible. Hence the focus for activity is in the triangle, but the “core of sustainable change” is within the circle and the two domains influence one another continuously (Senge, 2000, p.26). This model has implications for museums seeking to revision their relationship with their communities and become more relevant and accessible as educational organizations. Structural changes may need to occur to implement action and change, impacting on the organizational culture of museums. Understanding this integrated process as an opportunity for personal and professional growth, would provide museum staff with incentives to identify with and contribute to the new mission. The adaption of Senge's model for a museum learning context will be returned to in the discussion chapter.

Museums and Future Challenges

Jarrat (1996), guided by demographic trends in the USA, considers the role of museums in the future. Middle class values are emerging as the “dominant set” (p.24) in the United States and in other parts of the world. Jarrat argues that this has clear implications for museums. The questioning of authority, preference for “quality”, “durability”, “reliance”, and “trust” (pp.25-27) of institutions, and concerns about rights challenge museums to meet the demands of the middle class population and welcome them as friends to the museum.

Lifelong learning opportunities will also become increasingly available and entail formal educational opportunities, job training, and professional career development. With a predicted 70% to 75% of people able to do all the work within the United States and other developed countries, many people in the future will have to accept they may only be employed for a limited time or on a part-time basis. Jarrat suggests this trend presents a major challenge for museums. She encourages the utilisation of the new technologies to

develop business and educational models aimed at customising services and commercial products for individuals. Museums are envisaged developing sophisticated on-line databases to build up personalised visitor profiles and to enable individual needs and interests to be catered for in a personalised way.

According to Schuster (1993) the public interest in American art museums is two-fold: first, the idea that “artifacts and ideas will be available to future generations” and second, that “citizens can and will come into contact with the artifacts and ideas that the museums contain” (p.40). He argues that the public interest should be focused on the quantity and quality of public interaction with the artwork or research within museums, rather than what artworks are actually exhibited. Public and private non-profit funding bodies such as community and endowment trusts are increasingly including in their mandates a commitment to increasing the availability of the arts to the public. The depth and breadth of this audience along with the quality of their interactions with the arts institutions need to become crucial factors in staking a claim for public support. Thus, art museums will need to “document clearly the nature of their interaction with their public” (p.40). The two forms of researching museums’ publics are audience surveys and participation studies.

The New Zealand Context

The minimal amount of literature resulting from evaluation research undertaken in New Zealand museums is surprising, given the number of public museums and art galleries. The paucity of available material highlights the need for further studies and underlines the significance of the present study, centered in this instance, within a regional art museum.

McDermott Miller (1996), focusing on non-users, undertook a participation study for New Zealand museums and art galleries. This study found that 36% of New Zealanders over 15 years old had not visited a museum or art gallery in the last three years. However, their findings question the paradigms of museum usage that suggest that the typical New Zealand museum visitor is likely to be well educated, well paid, and employed in professional or managerial work or a student and pakeha. Those “least likely to visit are said to be, Maori or other ethnic minorities; blue collar, domestic, manual, clerical and sales workers and the unemployed; with a family income of less than \$30,000

pa, aged 60 and over” (Admission Charges: The Issues, MONZ, 1994,p.31, cited in McDermott Miller, 1996, p.1).

This study found that although educational and economic factors are reflected in museum visiting patterns, affluent, tertiary educated, pakeha, in professional, managerial service or clerical occupations make up a higher proportion (30%) of the non-users cohort than do those of lower socio-economic status. Twenty five percent of non-users describe themselves as “unskilled blue collar, retired, or unemployed” and 21% earn less than \$20,000. However 32% of non-users earn over \$41,000 and 25% hold a tertiary qualification or degree, while 31% have no educational qualifications.

New Zealand museums were perceived by non-users as being; *welcoming* (56%); *Active and innovating* (59%); and *friendly* (56%). They also considered that there were *educational* benefits (96%) and *entertainment* (66%) to be gained from museums. A significant 86% considered museums were a good place to show visitors “something special” about the place where they lived (86%). However, most non-users preferred to be elsewhere for their knowledge acquisition, recreation and entertainment for themselves and their “out of town” visitors. Although 70% preferred to take their visitors to public parks or gardens and 52% to spectator sports, 35% considered art galleries appealed as a destination. Another key finding of the McDermott Miller study was that family socialisation appears to be a primary factor in determining museum visiting and non-visiting patterns, with child-hood visitation patterns passing from one generation to the next.

Wizevich (1993) undertook a doctoral project involving six museum sites within New Zealand. She researched both the creation and the reception of exhibitions, studying how the exhibition development process structures “the relationship between providers and visitors” (p.223). This study identified a number of important issues that do not yet appear to have been addressed by follow-up action and documentation within the museum community.

Her research found that designers and curators involved in creating exhibitions were often in “philosophical opposition” and were “attempting to achieve different objectives via the same exhibition” (p.26). The primary focus became the exhibition itself rather than the visitor experience and this interfered with the communication of exhibition intentions. This led to deterministic design intentions that “failed to address both the

nature of the museum's free choice environment and the gestalt nature of visitor experience" (p.226). Consequently there was an inevitable difference between the intended and actual responses to the exhibitions by visitors.

Conceptual and perceptual gaps were found to exist between the providers and visitors as well as between the intended and actual responses in all exhibitions, with the educational intentions being the most poorly communicated. Wizevich suggested that the reasons for the communication failure of the educational content were attributable to cultural differences - knowledge, experience, education, social status, group membership etc, between the providers and visitors, as well as the finding that most visitors are "neither attuned to, nor expecting to find layered meanings" within the exhibition (p.227).

McAdam (1996) conducted case studies in four North Island museums and concluded that the institutional environment is a key factor to "individual effectiveness" (p.108). While exhibition officers were afforded professional status by their directors and curators and given considerable autonomy in their work, they were not subject to performance assessment reviews, either internally, or externally, through visitor evaluations. Peer evaluations, rather than exhibition evaluations, were applied. However, McAdam reports, "museum exhibitions are for the public" and not just for museum staff (p.111). A further finding of significance was that none of the case study museums involved public input into their exhibition development or evaluation procedures.

Action Research

The emergence of action research as an educational research method has been gaining increasing momentum since the 1980s. The term itself is attributed to Kurt Lewin who in the post-war years used it to describe a way of constructing knowledge about social systems and formal organisations, while at the same time working to effect change. (Bryant, 1996; Chisolm & Elden, 1993).

Action research and its equivalent research methodology reflective practice, have been described as being "concerned with understanding action and its outcomes and with acting through understanding" (Bryant, 1996, p. 116). With action research (AR) as reflective practice, there is always an interest in the "outcomes of action", as well as the theoretical knowledge implicit in the action. Thus, thought and action are linked "both in the practice which is being researched and in the practice of research itself" (p.116).

Elliott (1991) states that, “the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice, rather than produce knowledge” (Elliott, 1991, cited in Bryant, 1996, p.114).

Lewin’s action research (AR) model incorporates, “a cycle or spiral of conceptual discovery, planning, and executive and evaluative activities” (Bryant, p.107). A clear distinction is made between the researcher (the primary agent of change), and the researched (consigned to implementing the evaluations), in this schema. The primary objectives of Lewin and other early researchers involved in this approach, which was seen as conforming to a positivist paradigm, were to effect social change, and contribute to public understanding of the issues involved (Bryant, 1996).

Subsequent developments in the USA and the UK in AR followed different approaches. In the USA, AR was initially seen as client focused and dealing with their problems. Eventually this approach evolved and became an alternative research model to bridge the gap between institutional practice and research, which was perceived by practitioners as failing to deliver improved educational practice (Bryant, 1996).

At around the same time in the UK, Stenhouse (1985) advocated teachers as researchers and initiated several projects incorporating group approaches to effect change in educational practice, which incorporated AR methodologies that were distinctly different from positivist research. Case studies, aimed at changing practice through dialogue and negotiation between all parties, were successfully conducted, resulting in a revival of qualitative methodologies and “the collapse of the epistemological justification of the positivist paradigm” (Bryant, 1996, p.108). This was advanced on two fronts, AR as reflective practice (Schon, 1983), and AR as theoretical and action critique (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Winter, 1989, cited in Bryant, 1996, p.108).

Recent Trends in Action Research

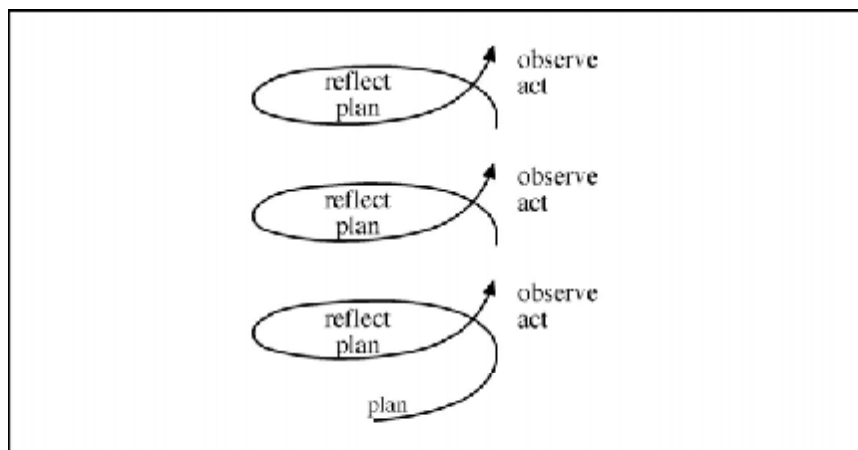
The ideas and practice embodied within the terms action research and reflective practice have been steadily growing as a preferred educational research methodology. As Bryant points out “for the educator it offers a mode of enquiry and understanding in which the conventional dualisms and distinctions between internal and external accounts, subjectivity and objectivity, theory and practice, means and ends, teacher and taught, researcher and researched, are dissolved”. Furthermore, because the researcher is an

“active change agent”, rather than a “participant observer”, this enhances its educational warrant (p.108).

However, there are different understandings of what AR actually involves and what it can justifiably claim. Cohen and Manion (1985), consider AR a style of research, which is “situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative”, and as a method, see it contributing to “the practioner’s functional knowledge of the phenomenon” engaged in (p.208). Therefore, the goal of AR is the improvement of practice. Furthermore, because AR relies predominantly on observational and behavioural data it is therefore empirical (p.215). However, there is also no consideration of reflection or critique in Cohen and Manion’s model (Bryant, p.110).

Figure 5.

Action research as a self-reflective spiral



Other researchers, for example, Carr & Kemmis (1986, 1993) advance AR as a means to change practice through action critique, by focusing on one’s own practice. In this sense it is “a participatory democratic form of educational research for educational improvement” (Kemmis, 1993, p.177), and considered an approach rather than a method. The “emancipatory potential” of AR is also emphasised in this approach by Kemmis as:

...an embodiment of democratic principles in research, allowing participants to influence, if not determine, the conditions of their own lives and work,

and collaboratively to develop critiques of social conditions which sustain dependence, inequality or exploitation in any research enterprise in particular, or in social life in general (p.179).

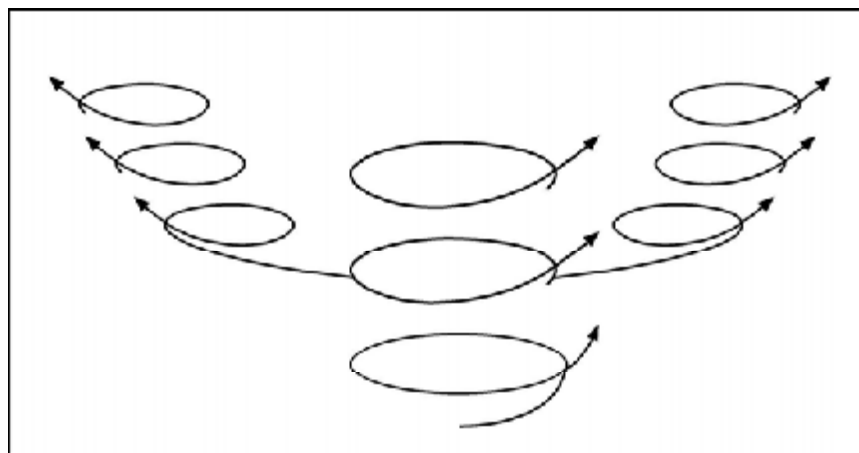
This emphasis on committed action or praxis is distinctly different from Cohen and Manion's interpretation. Rather than setting out to prove or disprove theory, Carr & Kemmis are intent on improving practice through AR. They identify the two key aims of AR: to 'improve' and to 'involve'.

Action research aims at improvement in three areas: first the improvement of a practice; second, the improvement of the understanding of practice by its practitioners; and third, the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place (p.165).

The theoretical model they propose for this approach is the "self-reflective spiral" (Figure 5) linking the construction of the past with "a concrete and immediate future. through action" (p.186-7). Thus, action researchers tend to develop their own theories based on personal knowledge arising out of first hand praxis and the "discourse of self-reflective communities of action researches" (p.187).

Figure 6.

The 'generative' action research model.



(Adapted from McNiff's model, 1992, p. 43)

McNiff (1988, 1991, 1992) considers that a problem is not essential to AR. Rather, all that is needed is a general idea that something might be improved, which may arise from the awareness that existing practice is not realising its aims or potential. She also suggests that AR is usually only applicable to “micro” areas of personal practice, rather than the “macro areas of socio-economic situations” (McNiff, 1992, p. 75).

Further, she argues that AR methodology is scientific, in the sense of being “principled action” based on rational thought, and far from “ad hoc” (p. 124). Drawing on Noam Chomsky’s notion of adequacy in linguistics, which suggests three levels of adequacy: *observational, descriptive and explanatory*, she proposes a model for AR that embodies a theory “with a generative capacity to allow for spontaneous, creative episodes” (1992, p. 43). Inspiration for the model, based on spirals of planning, acting observing, reflecting, re-planning, came from the concept that infinite possibilities can theoretically arise from a finite number of variables. Previous AR models were re-conceptualised as a three-dimensional action-reflection spiral.

The main focus for the research forms the central spiral, however other issues or problems may be explored as they arise, without the researcher losing sight of the main focus of the enquiry. This results in a three dimensional spiral of spirals (refer to fig 6). McNiff refers to this as generative action research, and proposes it as a model that has proven to be effective, enabling teacher- researches to “address many different problems at one time, without losing sight of the main issue” (p.45).

Winter (1989) uses the hyphenated term action-research in referring to “the basic unity of theoretical and practical knowledge” (p.4), but considers the process problematic if the reflection aspect of the cycle is hurried. He defines reflection as “the crucial process by means of which we make sense of evidence, whether from specific data-gathering procedures or from our practical experience as it occurs” (p.25). In this view, the interpretation of evidence and practice, to be of value, must reveal new possibilities for understanding and action and not simply refute or confirm the known. Winter argues that, on this basis, a model is needed for the reflection process, which is an alternative from the logic of natural science. Otherwise, action-research projects will likely be viewed as incompetent versions of ‘real’ science (p. 35). It is also important that the reflection process should also build on personal experience and practitioner competence.

Ebbutt (1985) defines AR as “the systematic study of attempts to change and improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions” (p.156). In this view, it is implicit that researchers are actually participating in the practices being researched, and working collaboratively with practitioners. AR is concerned with both understanding and effecting change in particular situations. The reference to change and improvement in Ebbutt’s definition emphasises the importance of improving practice in AR by transforming the situation.

The term ‘reflection-in-action’ is used by Schon (1983), in referring to the equivalent action research methodology. Schon also describes the relationship between transformation and understanding as one where “the practitioner” (p.14) is interested in transforming a situation for the better. Understanding the situation is also of interest but the key incentive is in the interest in change. This implies that AR does not necessarily have to be carried out by a special group of researchers, but can be what any practitioner might undertake as a particular component of everyday practice.

Schon advances reflection-in-action as an epistemology of practice, and challenges the traditional relationship between research and practice. He considers research an integral part of practice. This is carried out on the spot and linked to action, resulting in a direct exchange between research and practice. Schon considers that “reflection tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowings implicit in the action” (p.56). In this approach reflection is not only understood as an intellectual and subjective activity, but is also connected to action, and therefore involves a social dimension.

Summary

A number of themes have been identified in the chapter. Understanding the cultural contexts of museums, their audiences and their communities are important considerations for museums seeking to enhance their accessibility and relevance. Research into these contexts and their interplay should be an on-going activity within museum organisations to ensure that museums are more inclusive of their audience and community needs as well as maintaining the integrity and quality of the exhibition process. Cultural values (individual and collective) are seen as the key in contributing to cultural learning

and to effective organisational management. Therefore, knowledge of cultural contexts and values, including the culture of exhibition creation and reception, is fundamental to organisational change. The widespread practices dominating exhibition creation (the central nexus of museum culture) have seen museums accused of not providing enough opportunities for audiences voices to be heard.

Learning within a museum is a complex issue and creating a museum that is a learning environment, requires an understanding that visitors' experiences are related to their personal frames of reference. The constructivist concept of meaning-making has implications for educational organisations including museums, where it is understood as the visitor centred half of the creative process of experiencing museums and their contents. Models based on constructivist frameworks and involving the practice of personal disciplines have been adopted by learning organisations (Senge, 1990, 1994) working to change the culture of a learning organisation. This process, which is applicable to museums, is understood as a life-long journey involving deep learning cycles for individuals within the organisation, based on their knowledge and understanding of the relationship between organisational structures and culture factors.

Visitors view museums and exhibitions from their own frame of reference involving their personal, socio-cultural and physical contexts (Falk & Dierking, 1992). This presents museums with a number of complex challenges in the quest to be relevant and inclusive to their communities and in attracting a wider audience. The core mission of the museum should provide the guiding principles in their relationship with their communities. An emphasis on working alongside communities in collaborative partnerships and becoming a good listener are also seen as necessary in connecting with the community and building a sense of trust. The documentation of the museum's involvement with its community, including the outcomes, can provide a measure of the value of what it does. Collecting such information, including statistical data (visitor studies and feed-back), is necessary to justify the cultural contribution of museums to their communities, now and in the future. There have been few such evaluation studies undertaken within New Zealand museums.

The literature on action research (AR) reveals a variety of methodological approaches, however the underpinning aims to improve not only practice, but also the understanding of practice, and the practice situation, have gained acceptance and validity

within educational circles. The participatory and democratic nature of AR further add to its educational warrant in a variety of contexts. The model of AR from its early beginnings has always incorporated a spiral nature evolving as action-in-reflection, which synchronize well with the creative processes of artistic endeavours and exhibition creation.

In the author's view, the capacity of AR to embody "spontaneous creative episodes", (McNiff, 1996, p.43), that build on practitioner competence within a social context, further contributes to its suitability and flexibility, as an educational research methodology. Thus, AR is also provides an appropriate methodology in this present study, involving the creation and reception of an exhibition involving community participants.

The methodology that was to be used in this study, involving evaluations at various phases, and other details concerning the site and participants, was the next consideration and forms the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter II

Methodology in the Field

Introduction

The action research methods introduced in the overview and expanded within the literature review incorporating the action-in-reflection spirals, provided the researcher with a framework for an interpretive/constructivist approach to this pilot project involving the two distinct phases of the creation and the reception of the mandala exhibition.

The data collection methods in both phases incorporated a variety of strategies drawing on both qualitative and quantitative approaches to strengthen the validity of the interpretive approach. During phase one, two survey evaluations were undertaken using questionnaires. The second of these, taken at the end of the production phase of the group works incorporated a four point Likert scale as a data tabulation framework. The reason for using a scale without a mid-point was to get respondents to make clear positive or negative response to the statements. Some researchers prefer this scale, (for example Garland, 1998), provided it does not affect the validity or reliability of the responses. In this phase of the study the data collection was related to the research question on exhibition creation (Q.4) Field notes were also collected including the researcher's observations, as well as anecdotal comments of participants.

The second phase, focusing on responses to the exhibition from the participants, gallery staff, a control workshop group and the visitors, also involved four point Likert scale questionnaires as the main survey instrument. The responses from this phase would provide the data related to the first three research questions (Q1, Q2, Q3). Some visitor tracking within the exhibition space was also conducted and interviews conducted with selected visitors because of their particular engagement with the exhibition components. An extension activity involving a participatory hands-on art workshop, focusing on the mandala symbol, was also conducted with an adult control group whilst the exhibition was running. These participants also completed exhibition evaluation questionnaires.

A show-and-tell event was also held for the public towards the end of the exhibition, where the curator and a spokesperson from each of the four community groups

gave a first-hand introduction to the exhibition and the creation of the mandala works. This provided a background of the conceptual development through to the collaborative production phase leading to the completion of the final work.

Phase One: Exhibition Creation

A formative evaluation was conducted at the outset with those participants who self-selected into the workshops because the researcher was interested in tracking the perceptions of the group participants over the course of the project. Another evaluation was done when the group exhibition works were almost completed, but not yet installed in the gallery. A final response was gathered when the exhibition was officially opened and the exhibition creators could see their work alongside those of the others artists and groups involved. These evaluations took the form of survey questionnaires.

The initial motivation for this study emerged out of the researcher's interest in working with a number of artists and craft groups within the artistic community, and bringing them together under the banner of a multi-media exhibition within Te Manawa Art. The proposed theme was the mandala symbol¹. Very early on in the project the researcher had approached the Director of Te Manawa, to gauge the feasibility of the concept and obtain approval for mounting the exhibition in the gallery, and received a very positive response.

At this initial meeting, the director informed the researcher that a traditional Tibetan sand mandala (see fig.7, p.56) was to be created within the Te Manawa Life complex later in the year and she welcomed the idea of a contemporary exhibition focusing on the same symbol, being exhibited in the adjoining Art Gallery. In subsequent discussions with the curator and exhibition programme co-ordinator of Te Manawa, it became apparent that due to the set date of the Tibetan exhibition and other exhibition programme bookings, it was not going to be possible to have both exhibitions showing at the same time.

There would have been distinct advantages of having both exhibitions running concurrently, in terms of increased public awareness, the opportunity to share the mandala audience and extension programme possibilities. However, as well as the fixed gallery programme, the timeline did not allow adequate time for the researcher to complete the

¹ A circular , symmetrical design with symbolic meanings, (refer to Appendix 1)

foundational networking involving meetings, presentations and participatory workshops with artists and community groups that were considered an integral part of the research strategy and essential to generating a body of exhibition works of high quality.

Figure 7.

Detail of completed *Tibetan Sand Mandala*.



(Source: Chenrezig Mandala Poster. Manawatu Museum, 2001)

The next step was to agree on an exhibition date that suited both the researcher and Te Manawa Art. Thus, the dates of the exhibition were set, which followed the Tibetan exhibition by several months. Further discussions with the curator at Te Manawa established the exhibition brief and the parameters of responsibility and financial commitment of both parties, leading to the drawing up and signing of an Exhibition Agreement (see Appendix 2). It was the researcher's responsibility to 'liaise' with the artists and groups in regard to the delivery, transport, installation and removal of their

work. It was also the researcher's responsibility to fund all associated exhibition costs including freight, artists' materials and expenses. The gallery agreed to fund the production of signage and labels, installation and de-installation costs as well as the costs of the opening event and local advertising.

The actual location of the exhibition within the gallery space was also a key factor that determined the scope of the exhibition and the number of participants. Taking this into consideration, it was planned to invite four community groups to participate along with eight artists. Due to limitations in wall space, each artist was to submit one work. At the time of signing the exhibition agreement, the initial task of identifying the participant artists and groups had been tentatively underway for some time and a possible list of artists and community groups had been compiled by the researcher. A number of artists known to the researcher had already confirmed their interest in taking part in the proposed project. Now with a firm exhibition date and venue, a more formal approach to specific artists and community groups could proceed.

However, the funding of the exhibition still needed to be secured in order to fully realize the exhibition concept. The researcher located two potential sources of community funding whose criteria for assistance were met by the exhibition project. An exhibition budget and funding application was submitted to both, with support from his supervisor, programme director and the Director of Te Manawa. Given the timelines involved, it was again necessary to proceed with the project on faith that funding to facilitate this project would eventually be forthcoming.

Verbal assurances were given by the funding agencies that the strong community-based merits of the project meet their funding criteria, and it was on this basis that the researcher continued confidently with the initial meetings and presentations to artists and community groups. However, it was still some relief, when first one application and some time later, the second application were confirmed as being successful (Appendix 3a & 3b). The project finally had a secure financial base from which to proceed and meet a considerable part of the material and organisational cost associated with curating the exhibition.

The development of the project involving clarifying the exhibition theme, brief, and components as well as establishing the participants could now proceed .

Chapter III

Exhibition Development

Introduction

This chapter outlines the exhibition brief along with the intended messages to be conveyed and includes a justification of the exhibition theme and explanation of the title. The exhibition participants are also introduced and other exhibition components outlined.

Exhibition Title

The Immaculate Perception is the title of a book of poetry by the Canadian poet Christopher Dewdney (1986). The researcher considered this title embodied something of what the exhibition was aiming to achieve with the project visually and as a community concept. It was also felt that it would also convey a strong message to the participants that the mandalas would need to engage and hold the viewer's attention, thereby encouraging them to create interesting and subtle designs. Contact was made with the poet through his publishers, and Christopher replied personally giving permission to use extracts and quotations from the book. Thus, *Mandala: The Immaculate Perception* became the working title for the exhibition.

The Exhibition Brief

In line with the researcher/curator's aims of the project and in reference to the research questions, the exhibition brief was to:

- ❑ Exhibit a variety of interpretations of the mandala symbol.
- ❑ Involve local, regional and national artists as exhibition creators.
- ❑ Create an exhibition that was accessible, engaging, challenging, and educational.
- ❑ Create an exhibition that had an interactive participatory dimension for visitors.

Exhibition Messages

There were a number of messages that it was hoped the exhibition would convey :
As well as traditional Tibetan mandalas such as the Chenrezig Sand Mandala:

- ❑ A number of contemporary artists also work with mandala concepts.
- ❑ Mandala designs occur in the art and craft forms of many cultures.
- ❑ There are many possible interpretations of the mandala.
- ❑ Mandala patterns are to be found throughout the natural world.
- ❑ To see mandalas requires a special kind of looking.
- ❑ You can create your own mandala designs.
- ❑ Local community craft groups are a creative force within our community and can work individually, and collaboratively, to produce work of high quality and artistic merit when given the opportunity.
- ❑ The words art and craft can sometimes apply to the same object.

Including specific survey questions to establish how successful the exhibition was in getting these messages across, would contribute to answering the research questions on exhibition reception (Q2) and exhibition effectiveness (Q3).

Justification: The Mandala Symbol as Exhibition Theme

The concept of curating an exhibition that brought together the work of individual artists and community groups demanded a strong theme that would provide an inspiring artistic challenge while at the same time be able to be interpreted in a wide variety of media. It was also considered a priority to create an exhibition that was conceptually accessible and the community could identify with. Based on the exhibition developer's previous experiences of using the symbol as a focus for art making with tertiary art students, the mandala was considered to meet these requirements. The variety of possible design configurations provided a number of challenges across the range of student abilities typically present in an introductory tertiary visual arts programme. For those new to making art (usually around a third of the class), the basic geometric configuration provided a focus from which to develop a range of composition and art-making skills when working alone or in groups. More experienced and confident students, including those relatively advanced in terms of their skills and aesthetic awareness, were also challenged. These students were able to extend their skills and individual concepts incorporating a variety of media, leading to impressive expressive outcomes. Hopefully,

this would be the case with this community project involving a wide range of experience, skills and abilities.

Exhibition Participants

It was intended that the art works for this exhibition of the mandala symbol would comprise a variety of contemporary interpretations in various two and three-dimensional media. Furthermore, these interpretations and images of the mandala would provide a contrast to religious connotations, associated with the traditional Buddhist design that was created by the *Tibetan Sand Mandala* event.

It was the curator's intention to present an alternative to the view of the mandala as a religious concept. The generous media coverage during *Tibetan* exhibition of the monks creating their complex patterns with individual grains of coloured sand may have led to a public perception of the mandala as a strictly religious symbol. The event had been very successful in attracting large visitor numbers and the exhibition was also accompanied by an extended display of information relating to Tibetan culture and Bhuddist teachings that provided the context for the event.

The curator's intention in *The Immaculate Perception* (IP) project was to present the concept of the mandala as a symbol and a structure that appears in both the inner and outer worlds of nature and humankind that are connected by creative energy and the potential for change. In selecting artist participants for this project the researcher was able to draw upon his knowledge of local and national artists, whose works indicated an affinity with the subtleties of exploring 'visual perception' and who might be agreeable to creating a work for this exhibition. A list of potential local, regional and national New Zealand artists working in a variety of media (including both two dimensional and three dimensional works) was made. Several artists were known to the curator, which made early contact possible. Other artists' addresses, were obtained by contacting (Appendix 4) public or private galleries to obtain contact details.

The initial selection of ten artists included several that did not end up in the exhibition. This was for a variety of reasons. Computer artist, Richard Hartigan, an enthusiastic supporter of the exhibition concept, unfortunately had to withdraw through personal reasons. One artist declined outright, considering his work inappropriate for the exhibition and another was out of the country and could not be contacted. The final list

included eight artists: Debra Bustin, Liz Coats, Rachel Garland, Robyn Parkinson, Prakash Patel, Peter Roche, Ramon Rolfe, and Gordon Thompson. Their works incorporated a range of media including: Drawing, Painting, Printmaking, Light Sculpture, Quilting, and Mixed Media/ Installation.

It was considered that this selection of artists and media would provide an interesting variety of visual interpretations of the mandala. All artists were visited as early as possible in the exhibition development process in order for the researcher to meet with them and introduce the exhibition concept. This early meeting also established an on-going dialogue with some artists and allowed ample time for the development of their responses to exhibition concept. However, two artists, one from Wanganui, and the other based in Auckland, were visited and suitable works were selected from their existing works, in collaboration with the artist. The other six invited artists created new works specifically for the exhibition.

Community Groups

Locating and contacting suitable community groups to participate was a relatively a straight forward task; however arranging meetings became a time-consuming exercise. The names and contact telephone numbers of community groups, guilds and clubs are published weekly in community newspapers and in this way three community organisations involved in suitable craft-based activities were contacted. These organisations met only once a month, and it was necessary to coordinate initial telephone calls and introductory letters in order to meet with the members at the monthly meetings. The organisations contacted in this way were:

The Manawatu Embroiderers Guild

The Palmerston North Floral Arts Club

The Rose City Quilters

The curator also made contact with a craft felter who became enthusiastic about the project, and subsequently gathered together a group of individual felters to form a fourth group to participate in the exhibition naming itself, *The Manawatu Felters* for the purposes of the exhibition.

Following the initial contacts (telephone & letter), the response from the Presidents of the Floral Arts Club and the Embroiderers Guild was extremely positive, and it was

arranged that the researcher would present the exhibition proposal to members at their next monthly meeting. The Quilters organisation however, was not interested in the proposal (as presented by phone and letter), and the president considered that their members were individuals who would not be interested in producing a group work. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity given to present the idea personally to the members and let them decide democratically if they wished to participate or not, as had occurred with the felters and embroiderers.

The inclusion of quilting in the exhibition, however, was seen as a particularly appropriate craft with which to interpret the mandala. Therefore, further enquiries were made leading the exhibition organizer to an introduction with an independent quilter, who was not only enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the mandala concept, but had previous experience in creating mandala designs in her work. Robyn Parkinson was an experienced designer of quilted wall-hangings. As well as accepting an invitation to create a work especially for the exhibition, she also agreed to organize a group of quilters and coordinate the stitching of another group wall-hanging.

Figure 8.

Robyn Parkinson's mandala : *Quilted Journey*, 2001



(Mandala: The Immaculate Perception)

International Artists

The outdoor assemblages and eco-mandalas of Andy Goldsworthy and Chris Drury utilising found materials from nature were known to the curator, and had provided a source of inspiration and motivation for the curator to approach the floral arts group and get them involved in the exhibition. Both artists had web sites, and further searches revealed other mandala artists and background material that would provide an added interesting dimension and educational resource, if included in a web site as part of the exhibition. Therefore, an early decision was made to include a computer site of interesting examples of related examples and information to supplement the primary art works on exhibition. This would provide a link to other international artists working with mandala designs, and also provide a participatory dimension to the exhibition.

It was also envisaged that visitors would be able to create their own individual mandala designs with the aid of a computer art programme. Contact was made with a local company that specialised in educational computing equipment and following a presentation of the exhibition concept and demonstration of the *Mandala-Maker* programme, they agreed to sponsor the exhibition and supply the necessary equipment. The interactive computer site was to operate for one month during the exhibition.

The curator also arranged to work with another local computer technology company to create the computer resource programme that incorporated the international artists' works, and other relevant material located on the web. This would require a closed site that eliminated on-line access to other www sites. A CD would be compiled using edited material and a user-friendly instruction format created, that would make the site accessible to most visitors with a basic knowledge in using a computer.

The exhibition creation phase, involving working with the participants using the action research methodology could now proceed.

Chapter IV

Methodology in Action

Introduction

This chapter outlines the development of the project through the action research methodology, incorporating the dialogue and collaboration with the exhibition creators, through meetings, presentations and workshops.

The Presentations

With the list of exhibition participants now confirmed, the next phase of the action research could get underway. This involved further meetings with some artists (refer to p.65), as well as attending the monthly club and guild meetings to introduce myself and the exhibition concept to the members, with the aim of obtaining support for the project and attracting an enthusiastic working group to participate in a follow-up hands-on workshop. It was envisaged that the ideas and concepts for the final group works would be seeded and develop from these participatory workshops.

The presentation involved a short 20 to 30 minute introduction and explanation of the mandala theme accompanied by a series of overhead transparency (OHT) images. These featured a variety of naturally occurring mandala phenomena from the natural world (diatoms -minute sea creatures, snowflakes, flowers etc.) and mandalas created by human hands (children's pre-pictorial drawings, Celtic designs, Navaho sand paintings, rose-design stained glass windows from Christian churches, computer fractal designs etc.). Based on the researcher's experience with adult tertiary students, it was assumed that the many of the participants would be unfamiliar with the mandala in any shape or form, therefore this visual introduction was considered essential. At the conclusion of the presentation members were invited to express their support or otherwise for the club or guild getting involved in the project generally, and to add their names to a list, if they were interested in participating in the follow-up workshops.

The response to these presentations was evaluated at a later date by the researcher. The positive response at these meetings ensured that the club or guild organization was committed to supporting the project, and also that an enthusiastic

group put themselves forward to become the participants in the follow-up hands-on workshops. An exception to this presentation format was made with the quilters group, due to their key person assuming the role of facilitator and organizer for the group. Although it was not the researcher's original intention to have a group work produced without the researcher's input into the design and motivation process, it was decided to let this develop in its own way for two reasons. Firstly, it provided another approach to working within the community, and secondly, the researcher had provided a presentation to the coordinator of this group and had trust in her artistic knowledge, craft skills and organisational ability, to leave her to facilitate the process and coordinate the quilters on her own. As it eventuated, this trust was well founded (refer to Discussion, Chapter VIII).

Table 1: Showing contact and collaboration with craft group participants.

Organisation	Presentations & Meetings		Workshop 1		Workshop 2	
	Date	η	Date	η	Date	η
Embroiderers	2.8.01 1.10.01	45 35	1.9.01	16	8.9.01	14
Felters	6.9.01	1	15.9.01	5	22.9.01	5
Floral arts	13. 8.01 10.9.01	12 52	22.9.01	6		
Quilters	30.6.01 25.10.01	1 5				

The Workshops

As the exhibition was to be held within a designated gallery space at Te Manawa, it was decided to introduce the group participants to the environment early on in the exhibition development phase. Therefore, a meeting was arranged to familiarise participants with the exhibition space and meet gallery staff as soon as possible. It was also agreed with the gallery, that the first workshop would be held within the exhibition space and a time and date set for that.

Workshop 1

The first workshop involved the Embroiderer's Guild members who had enlisted themselves as participants in the two-hour session, which took place on a Saturday morning. Sixteen of the twenty people on the list turned up, with the others sending

their apologies. In line with ethical procedures advanced by the Massey University Ethics Committee, participants were given an information sheet (Appendix 5a) detailing the nature of the project as a research study and their rights as participants and asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 5b) if they agreed to proceed. All participants did so and the workshop got underway. This involved the researcher in facilitating individual and group, exploratory line drawing with the participants, working to music and sharing the journey stories of their expressive, symbolic drawings. At the conclusion of this session the participants were asked to complete a brief post-workshop evaluation and a short questionnaire (Appendix 5c) as part of the action research cycle. Similar comparative data would be collected at later phases of the project.

In line with Schon's reflection-in-action (refer to p.51) the results of the post workshop questionnaire were analysed as soon as possible after the session. Participant response to the workshop and the gallery environment indicated a mixed response to the suitability of the gallery as a venue for this type of workshop requiring firm working surfaces and ergonomic seating for sustained and focused drawing. Most had responded positively to the experience: *"some were out of our depth, but we felt it was a really great experience"*. Over a third of the respondents were not sure or did not think the gallery was a suitable venue, citing the unsuitable furniture as the main concern. One participant summed it up as follows: *"chairs too creaky, tables too high, light too dim"*.

There were other factors concerning the gallery environment. The exhibition organizer was informed that following this first workshop, a member of the gallery staff had noticed some paint on the gallery wall in which the workshop took place and attributed it to this event. Although the group had not used any coloured media, at this workshop, the implications of the feedback from participants and the gallery were clear to the researcher. Further workshops were planned that involved large-scale mock-ups and messy materials, therefore it was considered that subsequent hands-on sessions would be more suitably located in an environment conducive to making art. Avoiding a situation within the gallery environment, that might potentially create further problems, was also a consideration. It was on this basis, that it was agreed to hold the following workshops in the art studios at the Massey University College of Education, an environment that provided the necessary facilities and with which the researcher was familiar.

Workshop 2

The second workshop with the Embroiderers followed a week later, as they were enthusiastic to move quickly into the conceptual design phase. This session was focused on moving the participants into a brain-storming, discussion, selection and critique of possible design concepts. A brief review of the previous workshop took place to re-establish the context and the exhibition organiser introduced some visual material to provide possible directional guidelines (themes, colour, pattern, geometry etc.) to explore. The group of sixteen was asked to divide into two groups and presented with the task of preparing a full-scale visual mock-up of a mandala design concept within a limited time-frame and then separated into different studios to work. A selection of art materials (paper, pencils, pastels, paints, coloured papers and dyes etc) and equipment was on hand. At the end of this group activity (around an hour), the two groups presented their concepts and discussed the merits and possibilities of each of the design concepts openly.

From this collaborative session came the selected design concept, and full-scale layout drawing (pencil on paper) that was further developed and evolved in subsequent workshops organised by the embroiderers on their own initiative. The complexity of the final coloured work, embroidered on fabric, involved the skills of a larger number of members (around 50); however the completion of the design work was overseen by a smaller group of members responsible for the conceptualising the original design.

Workshop 1: Felters & Floral Arts

On reflection, following the two successful workshops with the embroiderers, it was decided that the researcher would follow a similar format, involving drawing, as an introduction to developing conceptual designs, but shorten this to about one hour and include more visual material and participatory discussion and activity in the second part of the workshop. This was because of the dynamics of these two smaller groups (5 felters and 10 floral arts) and because the actual craft disciplines and graphic design skills of those involved, called for a different approach. The embroiderers had been challenged but were reasonably confident and comfortable exploring ideas with graphic media (stitching is working with lines and patterns). However it was considered that accelerating this process with the floral arts and felters would facilitate the groups to get underway, developing their concepts more directly by working with

their materials and design concepts together, rather than producing a full-scale working drawing.

This proved to be the case, and following the first workshop, both groups were keen to explore design possibilities by working directly with their materials. Informed consent forms were completed at the beginning, and evaluation questionnaires at the conclusion of the workshops (Appendix 5a, 5b, 5c). Follow-up workshops dates were determined by consensus, with self-appointed group coordinators arranging the venue. These sessions were usually located at the home or studio of a group member.

Installation Artist

A further intention of the exhibition concept was to have an installation artist coordinate a work involving the participation of the wider community. Originally this was conceived as an outdoor work in the spirit of Andy Goldsworthy or Chris Drury, as mentioned. However, early discussions with Te Manawa Art staff persuaded the exhibition developer to move the site of the installation into the gallery, due to previous episodes of vandalism occurring to outdoor works located in the same area. Initial discussions with the artist for this participatory work were encouraging and it was agreed that the artist would submit a proposal based on these preliminary discussions and that this work would be the centerpiece for the exhibition space. Two further face-to-face meetings to monitor progress with the concept were held in the following months.

Although the artist (Debra Bustin) was highly motivated and had numerous ideas, the exhibition developer became concerned on receiving her written proposal. The installation called for the contribution of “hundreds” of art works by children to be produced. In the exhibition developer’s view, this did not seem feasible within the time frame, given the artist’s geographic location, making access to schools a time-consuming task and which also presented her with transportation problems. The limitation on gallery space was also a factor. A frank and amicable discussion with the artist resolved the situation, and it was agreed that she would concentrate on creating her own work for the exhibition. This was a relief to the artist, as she agreed that the coordination and production of the children’s work had become problematic. The decision to re-focus the concept and concentrate on producing a solo work in the limited time available, had the effect of significantly motivating the artist to get moving on her own work for the exhibition and ultimately complete it very effectively.

Dialogue With Other Artists

Following the initial discussions and written correspondence with the other individual artists the exhibition developer visited most of them personally to introduce the exhibition concept face-to-face. A selection of images of natural and created

Figure 9.

Gordon Thompson: *Koru Mandala*



(Mandala: The Immaculate Perception)

mandalas was taken along as a discussion point to give the artists an indication of the exhibition's intention and possible elements. The artists were asked to produce one work, taking into consideration the limitation on available wall space, with a general indication of size given (up to 2 metre square) for wall-mounted work. Follow-up letters were sent to artists confirming the details covered during these meetings. Further written and phone contact was maintained with the artists over the months and weeks leading up to the exhibition, to keep them informed of developments and involve them in the process of supplying the necessary documentation related to their art works (insurance, packaging, freight and delivery) to the gallery.

Table 2. Showing contact and collaboration with contributing artists.

Artists	Initial Contact	Personal Meeting	Work in Progress	Location
Debra Bustin	9.5.01	23.5.01	17.10.01	Otaki
Liz Coates	11.5.01	21.5.01	2.10.01	Wanganui
Rachel Garland	2.7.01	2.7.01	29.10.01	Wanganui
Robyn Parkinson	30.6.01	21.9.01	25.10.01	Manawatu
Prakash Patel	11.5.01	21.5.01	26.9.01	Wanganui
Peter Roche	9.5.01	29.9.01	3.10.01	Auckland
Ramon Rolfe	16.5.01	26.5.01	20.10.01	Feilding
GordonThompson	8.6.01	12.6.01	18.10.01	Palm Nth

Profiles and Labels for Exhibition

The artists and group coordinators were also invited to provide profiles and a short artist statement or introduction to accompany their work in the exhibition. These were passed on to the Te Manawa curator by the author for final editing, typesetting and mounting, along with all other text and visual material to be displayed within the exhibition.

Evaluations

In line with the action research methodology, responses from the participants involved in the exhibition creation were collected in evaluation surveys taken at three distinct stages of the project. These will be explained in the following chapter.

Chapter V

Findings: Exhibition Creation

Introduction

This chapter outlines the curator's action research approach in working with the artists and craft groups. The purpose of the evaluation surveys taken at two distinct stages of the exhibition creation cycle is explained and the findings presented.

Background

Working as curator with the two distinct groups of exhibition producers, namely the artists and the community groups, had initially involved the curator in two very different approaches to exhibition creation. One of the approaches was possibly similar to the way curators in public art museums would proceed with introducing and developing a thematic exhibition involving a number of independent artists. Artists are generally familiar with the responsibilities and requirements involved with the production of exhibition works. In the current project the curator had initially established contact and maintained dialogue with the artists to inform them of the exhibition theme, aims and conceptual possibilities. Subsequent contact was to keep track of their progress and development, pass on relevant information and leave them to interpret the exhibition theme in their own way. Intervention with the installation artist's concept was an exception. As explained in the previous chapter, the installation concept had become problematic due to the artist's difficulty in coordinating the work of others within a restricted time frame, rather than with her own creative work. The curator making a directive decision in this situation was functioning as the active change agent (Bryant, 1996).

The final phase in the project for the participants involved the evaluation of the artworks, the exhibition and its components. For this reason it was decided to involve the solo artists in an evaluation of the exhibition at the end of the production cycle, when their own work and the work of other artists and the community groups could be viewed as individual works contributing to the exhibition concept. Their response would provide an interesting dimension to the evaluation data. This data will be discussed in the phase two of the findings, concerning the reception of the exhibition.

Working with the four community groups, had involved a different approach, with the curator being actively engaged in the social and creative environment of the participants. The initial strategy of working with the various groups dynamics has been introduced previously (Chapter II). The action research cycle initially involved introductory presentations of the mandala concept that were extended during the motivation in the participatory, collaborative workshops. The embroiderers, floral arts group and felters engaged in this process to facilitate the design and development of their collaborative works.

The group participants were invited to evaluate the project at various stages of the production cycle. The first survey was completed following the first presentation. The second survey taken during the final stages of the completion of group work invited participant response to the exhibition as a whole, once it was open to the public. As well as the survey questionnaires, the researcher made journal notes following the meetings and workshops. Anecdotal comments and responses were also collected.

Survey One: Purpose

The purpose of the first survey (Appendix 5c) was to gauge the participants' prior knowledge of the mandala symbol, to evaluate the effectiveness of the project manager's presentation and to identify the personal context and agenda (Falk & Dierking, 1992) of the group participants and relate this to their expectations of community art galleries in general. Therefore the survey questions were designed:

- ❑ To ascertain the participants' prior knowledge of the mandala symbol and evaluate participant response to the project manager's presentations (Q 1, Q2).
- ❑ To understand the motivation and reasons for the participants involvement in the project (Q 8).
- ❑ To gauge participants' self-concept in relation to the terms artist, and craftsperson (Q 6, Q7).
- ❑ To establish the visiting patterns of the participants to the Te Manawa Art (Q 3, Q4, Q5).
- ❑ To ascertain the participants' expectations of an art gallery as a community exhibition venue and to gauge their view on how the Te Manawa Art meets those expectations (Q9, Q 10).

Survey One: Findings

Data Analysis (refer to Table: Appendix 5 c.)

Introduction:

The group participants (N=51) were women and comprised a majority of members (80%) with more than five years involvement with the club or guild. Many had been involved a lot longer (one stated “35years”). The friendly and creative community spirit to be found within these and similar community organisations, possibly indicates their enduring nature that enables them to maintain effective administrative structures, a loyal membership and also sustain active and enriching programmes for their members.

Participant Prior Knowledge and Response to the Presentations (Questions 1&2)

Before the presentation the mandala concept was unfamiliar to just over a third (35%) of the group participants although just over half (56%) did have some prior knowledge of the symbol. However, almost all the participants (98%) considered the presentation provided a clear explanation of the symbol and its significance to the project. The data relating to prior knowledge and response collected at the end of the first presentation to the embroiderers confirmed the researcher’s view that the format and content of the presentation provided an appropriate introduction, regardless of prior knowledge. Therefore, the basic format and content of this was repeated in the following presentations. However, a minor adjustment was made to the questionnaire following a respondent’s indication that a word change would better reflect their response in Q.9. In this case **the role of an art gallery**, was changed to **a role of an art gallery**.

Participant Involvement: Reasons and Motivation (Question 8)

Over half the group participants (56%) indicated that the location of the exhibition in Te Manawa Art was a “major” reason for their participation in the project. However, just under a third of the participants had other major reasons for their involvement. One wrote: *I’m interested in the creation of work and am not worried about the venue*. However, the strong collaborative and participatory dimension of the project appealed to many within this cohort, including reasons such as: *Involvement with a community of fabric artists in a communal project*.

Participant Self-Concept (Question 6 & 7)

Just over half the group participants (52%) considered themselves an artist and 80% were more confident to refer to themselves as craftsperson. However, a small minority (10-12%) was not sure if either term applied.

Participant Visiting Patterns (Questions 3, 4, & 5)

A significant proportion (69%) of the group participants were 'frequent' visitors, as defined by Falk & Dieking (1992, p.37) in visiting the Te Manawa more than four times a year, and most had visited within the last month.

This could be explained by a community art competition organised by the local Palmerston North City Arts Council that was mounted within Te Manawa. This exhibition also accounts for some of the individuals in the relatively high number of respondents (58%), who stated that they had previously had a work exhibited in the gallery. The small number of respondents (4%) not sure whether they have had a personal work in Te Manawa Art, could be explained by the fact that some had previously been involved in the creation of guild or club work that was displayed within the gallery and were not sure if this counted as personal work.

Participant Expectations of the Art Gallery (Questions 9 & 10)

The guild, club, and group members were almost unanimous (95%) in their view that a role of a public art gallery is to include the work of local artists and craftspeople. Just under half of the respondents (45%) considered that Te Manawa Art provided enough opportunities for local or regional people to exhibit. However, almost a quarter (24%) did not think they catered enough for local artistic community in terms of providing exhibition opportunities, and almost a third (31%) were unsure whether Te Manawa Art did or did not meet their expectations in this regard.

Summary: Survey One

This survey indicates that the participants are generally long serving club and guild members and strong supporters of Te Manawa Art. As a demographic cohort they make up a significant group of 'frequent' visitors to the gallery. They have high expectations that community galleries should exhibit the work of local artists and craftspeople, but had mixed responses as to whether Te Manawa met those expectations even though a significant proportion had already had work exhibited there.

The opportunity to be part of a collaborative group exhibition within Te Manawa was a clear incentive for many to be involved from the outset. The initial introduction and presentation of the exhibition theme and concept was considered a necessary first step and provided a focus, motivation and an underpinning of knowledge for the project to advance forward with confidence.

These are significant findings that relate to the research questions about audience composition; about effective exhibitions; and about museum effectiveness and will be included in the discussion points in the concluding chapter.

Survey Two: Exhibition Creation

Purpose of Survey Two

At this stage of the research cycle the focus moved to evaluating the personal involvement, motivation and satisfaction of the participants with the mandala project up to this point. A considerable amount of personal and collaborative effort had gone into the works thus far and with the exhibition still to be mounted, the participants were still unaware of the visual outcome of the other group and individual works in the exhibition. Therefore, the timing was deemed appropriate to gauge the general response to the project concept and its effectiveness as a process involving both personal and group agendas.

The researcher considered that undertaking an evaluation at this stage would provide useful comparative data in tracking participant perceptions during the project. One further survey involving the exhibition creators would follow once the exhibition was opened. This would involve the participants in an evaluation of the exhibition as a whole.

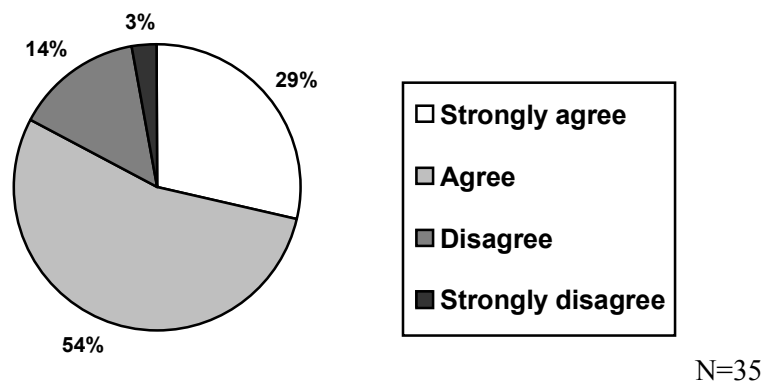
Validity of the Survey Instrument

A four point Likert scale (Garland, 1991) was used for the group participant survey (Appendix 6a) which was taken near the end of the production phase preceding the mounting of the exhibition in the gallery and before the four groups had seen each others' works. The sample (N=35) represents a 69% response by the group participants (N=51) involved in the creation of the collaborative mandala works who contributed to survey one. Although questionnaires were anonymous, they were marked for group identification to enable sorting into cohorts.

Response to Survey Two Statements and Analysis of Data.

The majority of respondents (83%) considered they had been creatively challenged by participating in the group work and almost a third of the respondents (30%), strongly agreed with the statement.

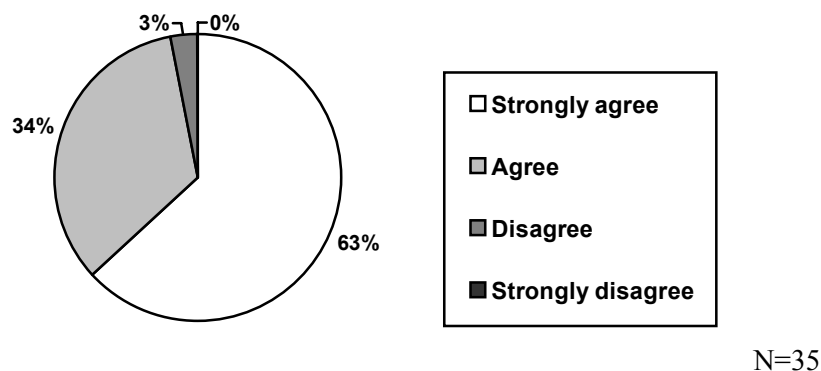
Figure 10.1 **Statement 1: My contribution to the group work was a creative challenge.**



Comments supporting this view made reference to the fact that this was a manageable commitment. An embroiderer noted: *as I have very little spare time...it was something I could do quickly and still be part of the project.* Another (Floral Arts) commented that it was *a good project to extend club member's thinking.*

The only comment offered to support the minority view (15%) who responded negatively was from an embroiderer who stated: *I found the work most enjoyable but not difficult.*

Figure 10.2 **Statement 2: I am pleased with the finished work.**

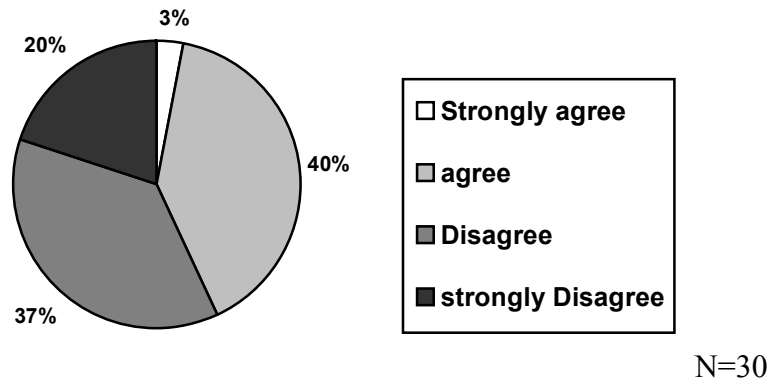


Overall, there was a very positive response (97%) to the completed works and a clear majority of group members (63%) strongly agreed with the statement. An

embroiderer commented *for a consensus design they work surprisingly well*; a floral artist considered: *If anything, (the result) exceeded our expectations*.

Figure 10.3

Statement 3: There are parts of the design I would change if I could.

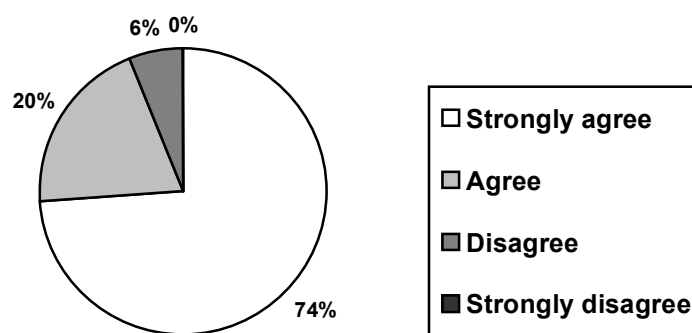


Although, a majority of the respondents were content with the work as presented and did not wish to change it in any way, a significant 43 % of respondents would like to have altered some aspect of the finished work. This is an interesting result in light of the response to Statement 2 (p.76), indicating an overall consensus of satisfaction with the final work. However, the participant comments possibly indicate a degree of healthy critical reflection, rather than criticism.

One floral artist was *disappointed with the framing*, and wanted to have more *dimension* in the work. An embroiderer commented: *most people have their own ideas on design and I think these two ideas worked well. But if I did it, it would be different*. Another suggested: *Some of the stitchery and colour combinations could be better*. One respondent considered that: *The design was fine. Some of the interpretation could be improved, but not much and in any case that is only one point of view*.

Figure 10.4

Statement 4: The group project has been a success and a positive experience for the group/club/guild.

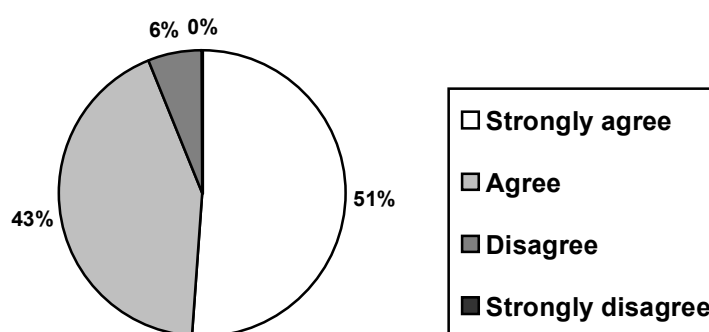


N=35

Three quarters of the respondents (74%) strongly agreed that the project had been a success for their organisation. The strong positive response (94%) overall, to the project as a group experience correlates closely with the respondents' satisfaction (96%) with the completed work (Statement 2). An embroiderer commented that *everyone has been excited about the project*. One suggested that *this can be seen by the number of people who joined in*. Another commented *group projects are the strength of this guild*.

Figure 10.5

Statement 5: I have enjoyed working with the mandala symbol as a focus for the group work.



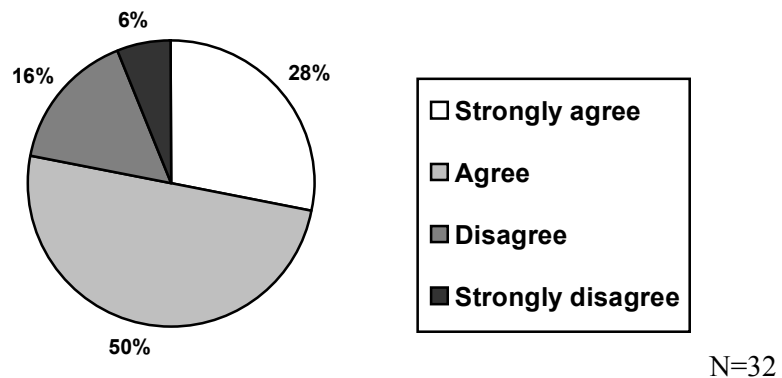
N=36

The mandala theme was enjoyed by the majority of the respondents (94%) and this figure included a relatively high percentage (51%), indicating strong agreement, of the enjoyment factor. A floral artist commented *I enjoyed it and found it satisfying*;

another thought it *a really good exercise to work around*, while an embroiderer noted that *the project was simple and encouraged a lot of people to join in*.

Figure 10.6

Statement 6: The presentation /workshop was an essential introduction to the mandala group project.

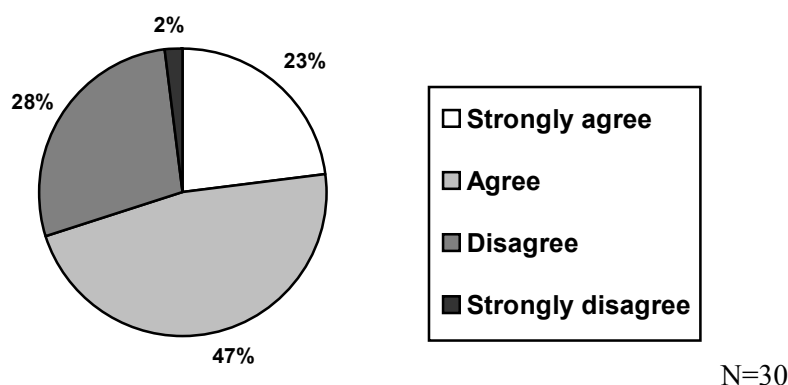


Over three quarters of the respondents (78%) gave a positive response to this statement. Only supportive comments were forthcoming. An embroiderer considered *the presentation was excellent and the workshops amplified this*. A felter *enjoyed the brain-storming day...it inspired me to do some work*. Another stated *it set the scene and focused our ideas*. Although the curator had gained the clear impression that these interactive, collaborative sessions were well received and greatly motivated the participants, it was encouraging to have this view confirmed by the questionnaire data.

It was also important that a sense of agreement concerning the design concept develop out of these sessions that would create a momentum that could be sustained through to the completion of the project. It was the researcher's view that to achieve this outcome, this cooperative spirit needed to emerge from within the dynamics created by group participants, rather than be imposed on them. Therefore, the development of the design concepts, although initiated out of the workshops, was totally in the hands of the participants from the outset. This gave them ownership over their designs and a sense of collaborative input into project development and final creative outcome.

Figure 10.7

Statement 7: My involvement in this project has motivated me to start on another creative work.

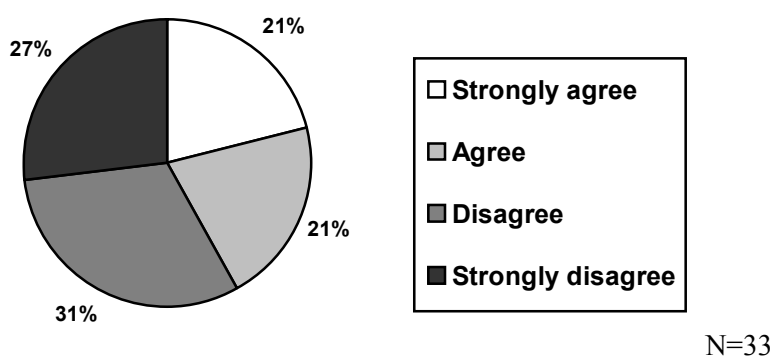


It was evident that the mandala project had led to a significant majority of respondents (70 %) commencing another work. *I have started already ...planning, sourcing, materials*, commented one. However, an embroiderer qualified her positive response by adding, “*I always have something happening*”. However, almost a quarter of the respondents (23%) strongly agreed they had been motivated by their involvement.

Personal Agenda Questions

The purpose of statements 8, 9, and 10 (following a related question in the first survey) was to identify the personal agenda of the respondents, relative to the venue and the other exhibition participants.

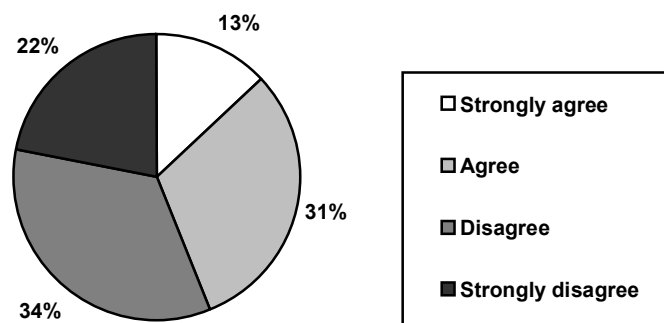
Figure 10.8 **Statement 8: Knowing the work was going to be hung in the Manawatu Art Gallery was a strong incentive to produce my best effort.**



Over half of the respondents (58%) did not consider the exhibition venue a significant factor in their personal motivation. Several commented on their strong personal commitment to their work regardless of the venue or other exhibitors; *the work itself is enough incentive*, is how one expressed it. However, a significant minority (42%) did acknowledge the venue as contributing to their input to the project. Comments included; *I would always do my best work, but it will be gratifying to know it will be hung in the gallery*; another (floral arts) considered it would be: *good exposure for the club...and a challenge with what (materials) we could use, because of the length of the exhibition and location*.

Figure 10.9

Statement 9: Knowing that our group work was going to be on exhibition with other group works was a strong motivation.

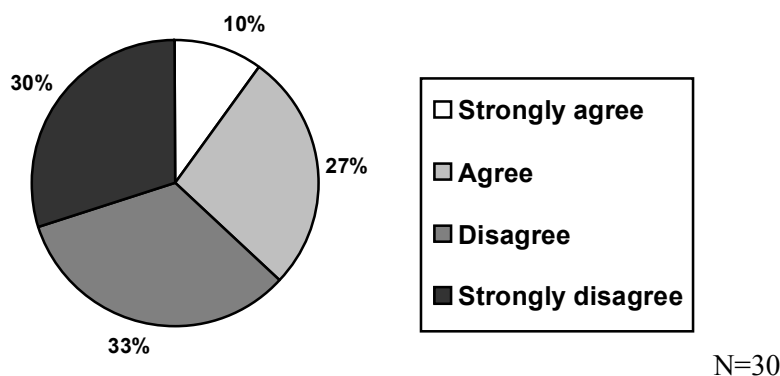


N=32

The response to this statement elicited an almost identical response in terms of the positive/negative split in Statement 8, with just over half the respondents (56%) indicating that the involvement of other craft groups was not a significant factor in their personal motivation. However, a significant variation within that split emerged with the *Strongly Agree* response dropping to 13% (from 21%). This shift in agenda response was illuminated by the comments indicating that a spirit of interest and cooperation rather than competitiveness exists within the craft community of Palmerston North. An embroiderer noted, *I am not competitive with what I do ...but I will be interested to see how the other groups tackle it*. Another commented, *It's good that it will be displayed with other groups, but that's not my motivation*. However, a floral artist considered it *a wonderful opportunity for our members to be involved with other groups*.

Figure 10.10

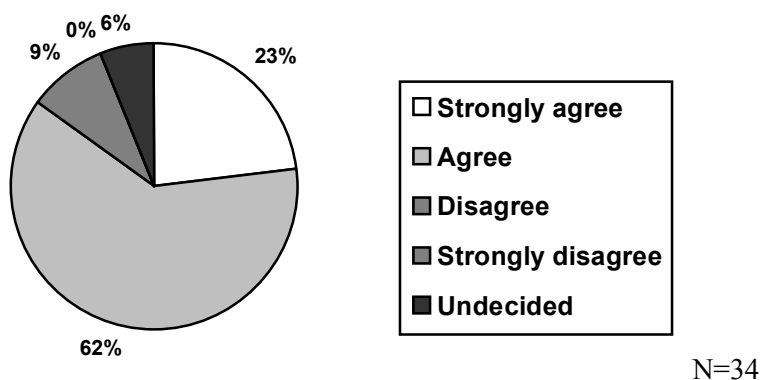
Statement 10: Knowing that the group works were going to be exhibited with artists' works
was a strong motivation in my involvement.



A clear majority (63%) rejected the suggestion that exhibiting with other artists was significant factor in their personal motivation. An embroiderer reacted indignantly to this notion stating, *“What a patronizing statement. I am an artist, but in this project I was part of a group rather than an individual”*. Comments from the minority (10%) who acknowledged that the inclusion of artists was a strong motivating factor emphasized the positive aspects of the mix. For example, *I enjoyed the challenge* (Floral Arts); and *I enjoy seeing a mixture of works in different media* commented another embroiderer.

Figure 10.11

Statement 11: I would like to be included in a future group project if the opportunity arose.



A large majority of respondents (85%) were agreeable to the idea of being involved in a similar project in the future. When combined with some of the previous data (Statements 1, 2, 4, 5, 7) this result tends to indicate a high degree of satisfaction overall with the exhibition concept, process and outcome of the group work by a significant majority of participants. Interestingly, this percentage correlates exactly with the number of respondents (85%) who found their contribution a creative challenge.

Participant opinion on the future of the group mandalas

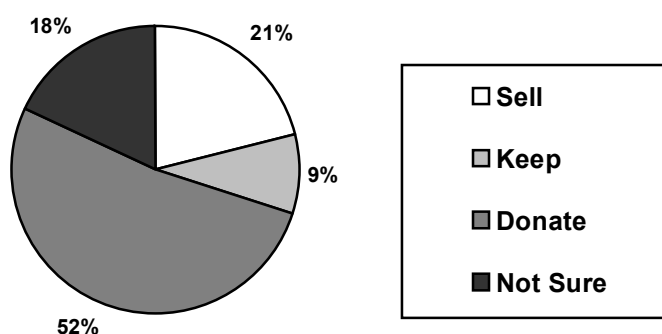
Statement 14. Please indicate what you think should happen to the completed exhibition group work.

The participants were given the first three options listed to choose from in deciding what should become of their mandalas once the exhibition was over.

1. Put on sale during the exhibition to compensate members for their contribution of materials.
2. Keep the work in the group/club/guild as a reference or archival work.
3. Donate the work to a suitable collection, trust or community organisation.
4. Not Sure.

Figure 10.12

Statement 14. Please indicate what you think should happen to the completed exhibition group work.



N=33

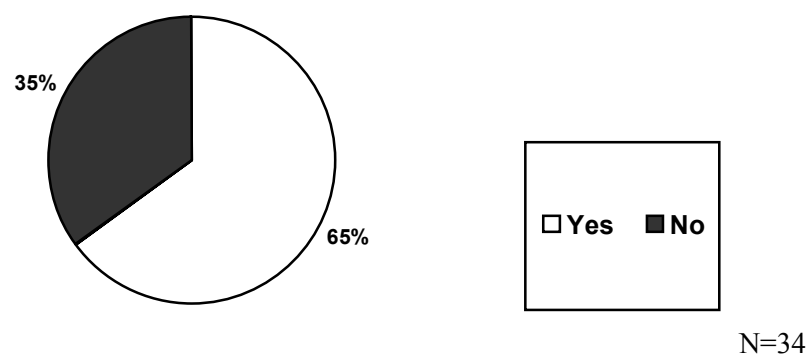
Just over half of the respondents (52%) were in favour of donating their group work, confirming the notion of community spirit emerging in Statement 9. This is noteworthy considering the creative input, the materials donated and the time invested in the works. A surprisingly small number (9%) wanted the works retained by their organisation; however a significant minority (21%) opted to sell the work. A similar proportion (18%) of respondents could not decide from the listed options and indicated this with an added comment to their questionnaires. This prompted the researcher to add a *Not Sure* category to the data list for this statement.

Tibetan Mandala Event: Influence and Impact

As explained in Chapter III (p.52), the *Tibetan Sand Mandala* event preceded *The Immaculate Perception* exhibition by several months. However there was a slight overlap with the production phase which provided an opportunity for participants to experience the creation of a traditional sand mandala. The project manager encouraged members to attend this event when the opportunity arose during meetings that took place at this time. Therefore, when designing the survey taken two months later, the researcher was interested in establishing if there was any correlation between visiting the Te Manawa event and seeing the creation of a traditional Buddhist mandala, and the individual contributions to the group works.

Figure 10.13

Statement 13. I visited the Tibetan Sand Mandala

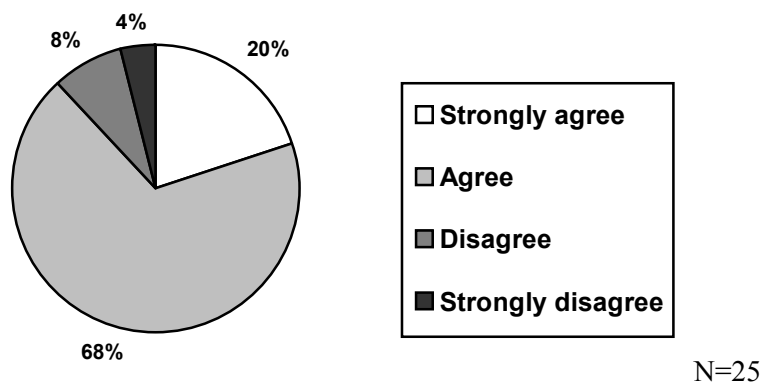


The results illustrated in the pie graph indicate clearly that this tended to be the case. Almost two thirds of the craft group respondents (65%) had visited the sand mandala event while it was in Palmerston North.

Figure 10.14

Statement 14: The Tibetan Sand Mandala made an impression on me, and my contribution

to the group work.



Of the respondents (65%) who had visited the sand mandala earlier in the year, a clear majority (88%) considered the experience had been influential as an experience and contributed in some way to their group work. A significant proportion (20%) selected *Strongly agree*. Although one respondent differentiated between the ‘impression’ and the ‘contribution’ acknowledging the impression the sand mandala made but did not consider it had influenced her contribution to the group work. This alerted the researcher to identifying this as a ‘double-barreled’ question, rendering the data problematic in terms of correlating the visit to the sand mandala, with any influence on the participant contribution to the group. However, it was clear that the experience had provided an enriching background experience that contextualised both the individual and the group interpretations of the mandala.

Summary

The findings at this stage of the project indicated that this approach to exhibition curation motivated by the action researcher provided the participants with a unifying theoretical underpinning, focus and motivation for the project. Over three quarters (78%) of the respondents indicated that the sessions with the action researcher provided an “essential introduction” to the exhibition project.

A significant majority of the craft group respondents were also very positive concerning the personal creative challenge (83%) involved with the project and with

the outcome of their group efforts (97%). As well as gaining significant personal enjoyment, 94% also considered that their organisation had benefited in a positive way by their involvement in the project.

Almost three quarters of the respondents indicated that they had been motivated to commence another work by their involvement. Over three quarters of the respondents (78%) were also in agreement that presentations and workshops had provided an essential introduction to the project.

Figure 11.

Visitors at desk site responding to exhibition questionnaire.



The motivation and involvement of the majority of group participants in the project tended to be mainly related to the strong creative group spirit involved in collaborative work, rather than other personal factors such as the gallery venue or having their work displayed with other exhibition participants. Thus, the outcome was more a matter of curiosity and interest in what other groups and artists would produce, rather than a competitive exercise. This finding has implications for understanding the connection between exhibition creation and the audience (Question 1) when working with the local community. The interest and curiosity generated within the various creative networks about the other participants' outcomes is a bonus that would add to the word-of-mouth factor in generating an audience from within the local community. The community spirit also emerged with over half the respondents indicating they

preferred their work to be donated, rather than sold or disposed of in some other way, at the conclusion of the exhibition. The *Tibetan Sand Mandala* event had also clearly been an enriching experience for the majority (88%) of the respondents who had visited.

A clear majority (85%) of the craft group respondents also indicated their willingness to be involved in a similar future project if one should eventuate. This also endorsed the positive outcome for these stakeholders in the overall project up to this stage and in the action research.

These findings also contribute to an understanding of what makes an effective exhibition (Question 3) and also to how the exhibition creation process can contribute to the art museum's effectiveness (Question 4) and will be returned to in the concluding discussion.

The final stage in the evaluation of the project by the exhibition creators would take place when the exhibition was finally open to the public and an evaluation of their completed works, the other exhibits and the exhibition as a whole, could occur. The following chapter focuses on these aspects and presents the responses and an analysis of the findings of the exhibition reception evaluations. A number of other perceptions of the exhibition, from cohorts other than the exhibition creators, also contribute to the exhibition reception evaluation data.

Chapter VI

Exhibition Reception

Introduction to Phase Two

This chapter forms phase two of the study and details the responses to *The Immaculate Perception* by a variety of cohorts with differing relationships to the exhibition. These include the contributing artists, the crafts groups; the gallery staff of Te Manawa, an extension activity target group and the visitors to the exhibition. Collecting data on the attitudes and perceptions from these various sources provided a degree of triangulation to the evaluation survey results, contributing to the robustness of the interpretive analysis. The responses are divided into two parts within the chapter:

Part One will focus on the evaluation findings from the artists and craftspeople, gallery staff and target workshop (Survey Three: Appendix 6b).

Part Two will report on the response from visitors to the exhibition. As well as presenting data from questionnaire respondents, this section will also include information from other sources of data collection (i.e. visitor tracking, observation and interviews) gathered during visitor studies conducted during the exhibition.

Validity

The sample (N=35) represents an 83% return by the participants sent the evaluation (N=42). Although questionnaires were anonymous, they were marked for group identification on the forms, to enable sorting the respondents into cohorts.

Part One: Artists, Craft Groups and Gallery Staff Responses & Analysis

Survey Three : Purpose

Following the opening of the exhibition, another four point Likert scale evaluation questionnaire was distributed. This survey was to provide data as to the perceptions of a variety of stakeholders to the exhibition and the work in it. These data would give both a collective response by the stakeholders, as well as highlight any differences emerging among the cohorts or anomalies within the cohorts. The survey targeted the component

elements and aspects, including structural and organisational features, as well as the exhibition concept. The researcher also wanted to ascertain whether the project and working with the mandala theme had resulted in any influence on the direction or future aspirations of the participants in their personal artwork.

This survey included four stakeholder cohorts: the craft groups, the artists, Te Manawa Art staff and a mandala workshop group taking part in an art programme at Te Manawa Art. The multi-media mandala extension experience organised by the researcher, involved nine adult participants in two three-hour workshops, taken a week apart during the exhibition. The exhibition was used as an introduction and focus for their drawing activities in session one. The follow up workshop held in the art studios of the Massey University College of Education introduced a range of mixed-media and led to a series of personal mandala works. The questionnaires were completed following this workshop. Several of these mandalas were selected by the artists for their final exhibition of selected works at the gallery celebrating the conclusion of their programme.

Survey Response and Emerging Patterns

The response represents a 74% return from the participants who were sent questionnaires. Gallery staff, quilters and mandala workshop participants returned all of their questionnaires (100%). Half of the artists' cohort (50%) sent questionnaires returned their evaluations completed. Several out of town artists either did not visit the exhibition or only attended the opening and considered they had not viewed the exhibition sufficiently to comment. The remaining craft groups varied from a 50% to 80% response rate. The respondents overall were slow in returning this evaluation and it was suggested by two independent group leaders that the pre-Christmas and holiday period without any meetings over this period accounted for this.

A limitation of this data is the sample size variation within the cohorts. However, the responses as represented in the figures do provide a graphic illustration of the emerging similarities, differences and patterns within the responses overall. The fact that four cohorts were involved in this evaluation also provides a higher degree of robustness to the data which contributes to the validity of the researcher's interpretations.

Exhibition Evaluation: Responses to Statements 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12.

The evaluation data listed in the percentages in Table 3 gives the detailed responses of the craft group respondents only, plus the total responses (N) of the other stakeholder cohorts within the Likert scale divisions. These totals are then illustrated as summative percentage graphs in Figure 12.1 (p. 90).

Table 3: Showing exhibition evaluation responses.

Note: Percentages have been taken to the closest whole number in all calculations.

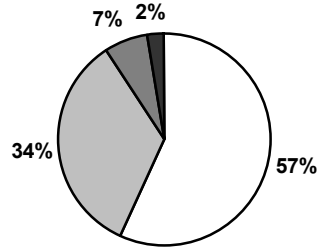
Exhibition Evaluation by Exhibition Makers						
Q	Statement	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Moderately Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
1.	The exhibition content was attractive to visitors.	10	8	0	0	η=18
2.	The exhibition design/layout was effective and appropriate for the gallery space.	15	4	0	1	η=20
3.	The exhibition came across as a focused and unified concept.	10	7	1	0	η=18
4.	I was pleased with the official opening as an event.	5	3	2	1	η=11
5.	The exhibition layout facilitated visitor flow throughout the exhibition components.	11	6	1	0	η=18
8.	I consider that my understanding and knowledge of the mandala symbol was extended by this exhibition.	12	5	1	0	η=18
9.	I consider that my aesthetic appreciation of the mandala symbol has been extended by this exhibition.	9	6	2	0	η=17
10.	I intend to continue to work with mandala configurations in my personal work.	1	7	3	1	η=12
11.	Featuring mandala works by practicing artists and group works by craftspeople works well as a concept.	12	4	0	0	η=16
12.	I would like to be involved in a similar exhibition project if the opportunity arose.	9	7	1	1	η=18
A.	Craft Groups Total Response	94= 57%	57= 34%	11= 7%	4= 2%	N=166
B.	Gallery Staff Total Response	5= 15%	18= 53%	5= 15%	6= 17%	N=34
C.	Extension Group Total Response	40= 65%	18= 29%	3= 5%	1= 1%	N=62
D.	Artists Total Response	28= 69%	8= 20%	3= 8%	1= 3%	N=40

(Note: In the above statements η refers to the number of craft group respondents selecting that option. However, in rows A, B, C and D, N refers to total number of responses to listed statements by the respective cohorts. Not all statements were applicable to gallery staff (i.e. Q10) or the extension workshop group (i.e. Q4, Q11, Q12) and consequently were not included in their questionnaires. (Refer to Appendix 9 for evaluation data details).

Figure 12.1

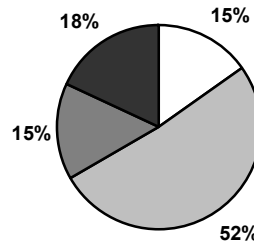
Graphs Showing total positive and negative responses to evaluation questions.

A. Craft Groups Responses



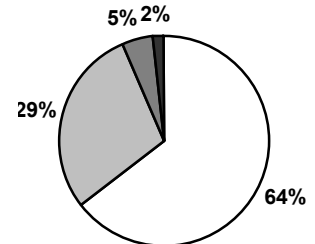
N=165

B. Gallery Staff Responses

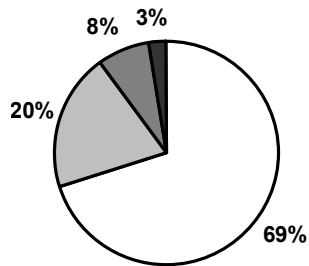


N=34

C. Extension Workshop Responses

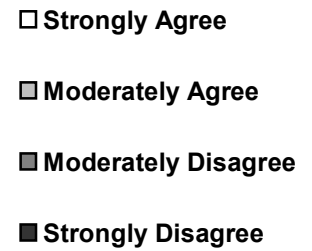


N=62



D. Artists' Responses

N=40



Analysis of Cohort Responses as Positive and Negative Indicators

These graphs (fig. 12.1, A-D) indicate a very positive response to the listed statements. The craft groups, artists and extension workshop respondents were most enthusiastic in recording predominantly *strongly agree*, responses to the questionnaire statements and when the *moderately agree* figures were added, averaged a ninety-one per

cent positive response indicating high satisfaction overall with the exhibition concept and presentation.

Gallery staff, although positive overall (67%) were around four times less likely to *strongly agree* with the statements (15%) than the other three cohorts. Gallery staff also recorded a thirty-two percent negative response overall in their thirty-four responses, as compared to the relatively low negative response from the three other cohorts which averaged nine per cent in their two-hundred and sixty-eight responses. This result also indicates that the gallery staff response is almost four times more negative than the other cohorts combined.

Evaluation Statements Analysis.

Exhibition Design, Layout and Concept.

Statement 1: The exhibition content was attractive to visitors.

Statement 2: The exhibition design/layout was effective and appropriate for the gallery space.

Statement 3: The exhibition came across as a focused and unified concept.

The respondents were almost unanimous in considering the exhibition design and layout attractive (97%), as well as appropriate and effective (94%) for the gallery space. Comments included: *Definitely aroused interest and awareness* (Floral Arts) and; *It followed the usual form of display, however it catered for the quick survey approach and a more in-depth investigation* (Embroiderer). A felter considered the exhibition *had great WOW impact.*

There was similar response to the exhibition concept with the majority of respondents (91%) agreeing that it came across as focused and unified. A quilter considered it: *a difficult concept, but was surprised how well they presented it.* A majority of respondents in this positive cluster (60%) *strongly agreed* with the statement. An artist commented: *The variety of media and uses of rectilinear / curvilinear elements in different contexts added up to a varied but unified mandala concept.*

Exhibition Opening

Statement 4: I was pleased with the official opening as an event.

Although over three quarters of the respondents who had attended the opening, indicated they were pleased with the official opening of the exhibition (77%) a number indicated there was an aspect of the opening they considered disappointing. A quilter summed it up with the comment: *The mayor's speech seemed more politically motivated than focused on the exhibition theme.* An artist considered that *the opening tended to lack focus -Mayor rather new to his duties- not informed about the concept, i.e. he did not do his homework!* The only comment offered in the entire survey response by any gallery staff member pertained to this statement and endorsed this view that the *Mayor's speech was inappropriate.* One person also suggested that *name-tags* would have added to the occasion. However, another considered it, *a splendid and well-attended opening night* (Floral Arts).

The points made concerning the opening were well made and significant in that the Mayor had in fact been supplied with a detailed background to the exhibition and speech notes to assist in his first official appearance as Mayor in front a significant number of representatives of the local arts community. Thus, it was an opportunity lost to publicly acknowledge the collaborative community spirit represented within the exhibition.

Visitor Flow

Statement 5: The exhibition layout facilitated visitor flow throughout the exhibition Components.

The respondents were again almost unanimous (94%), that movement, around and through the exhibition was facilitated by the design and layout. The majority of this positive cohort (58%) *strongly agreed* with the statement. An embroiderer commented: *The gallery space was very suitable for the number of exhibits and their individual sizes.* Another thought, *it was too crowded at opening for viewing and flow, but at a later visit the flow was okay.* A floral artist considered it, *a good space to allow each exhibit to be viewed individually.* However, an artist initially responding to the design and layout observed that *the little space over the stair well contained some lovely works, but many people overlooked this space.* This view was also confirmed by tracking data

(Appendix 10 b.) that showed this part of the gallery to be a ‘cool’ spot in terms of visitor flow. The artist amplified this view in responding to the above statement *this space tends to fragment a show due to architectural features, but in spite of this visitor flow seemed comfortable*

Mandala Symbol: Knowledge, Understanding and Aesthetic Appreciation

Statement 8: I consider that my understanding and knowledge of the mandala symbol was extended by this exhibition.

Statement 9: I consider that my aesthetic appreciation of the mandala has been extended by this exhibition.

The majority of respondents considered that their personal knowledge and understanding (84%) and their aesthetic appreciation (84%) of the mandala symbol had been extended by the exhibition. An embroiderer commented: “*This exhibition introduced me to the mandala symbol*”. However, another commented: “*I think the preliminary workshops did more*”. A felter commented that: “*it made me look for books, examples etc. and see them around*”. A floral arts person stated: “*Yes, together with the wonderful original (mandala) by the Buddhist monks*”.

Although the overall positive response was the same for both statements, there was a significant difference in the proportion of *strongly agree* selections by the respondents. While over half the respondents (56%) *strongly agreed* with Statement 8, significantly fewer (42%) selected this option for Statement 9. The main shift came from the craft group cohort, who tended to be most assured in assessing the knowledge and understanding factor, and less certain about their aesthetic perceptions of the exhibition.

Artists were predominantly positive in responding to both statements. One artist considered the “*happy coincidence of the Tibetan Monks earlier- enlightening*” and thought the “*individual responses – interesting*”.

Gallery staff respondents showed an interesting variation between their responses to the two statements. Although staff were unanimous in *moderately agreeing* with Statement 9, that their aesthetic appreciation of the mandala symbol had been extended by the exhibition, each selected a different option in regard to their understanding and

knowledge (Statement 8). One staff member maintained their overall negative perceptions throughout the questionnaire and *strongly disagreed* with the statement.

The responses to these two statements tend to indicate that apart from the negative response from within the gallery cohort, the artists, craftspeople and gallery staff overall, indicated a positive outcome from the exhibition, in terms of their understanding, knowledge, and aesthetic appreciation, of the mandala symbol.

Exhibition Concept

Statement 11: Featuring works by practicing artists and group works by craftspeople worked well as a concept.

The concept of the exhibition, involving the work of artists and craftspeople, drew a mixed response. While the artists and crafts groups were unanimous that the concept worked well, with three quarters *strongly agreeing* (see figure 12.3, p.97) the gallery staff responses reflected inconsistent perceptions of the concept with each selecting a different option. An artist in strong agreement with the statement included the comment: *Yes, because there is great variance in styles, yet the theme is well known to us all. The mandala is one of our earliest drawing icons. But I would broaden the concept as symmetry.* A floral artist considered it, *a challenging exercise which required much thought.*

A possible underlying assumption to be taken from the gallery staff responses could be connected with their personal and professional agendas. Like most provincial art galleries, the staff at Te Manawa Art is made up of individuals with diverse backgrounds, professional expertise and personal agendas in relation to the organisation. Arguably, this gives each staff member a distinctly individual orientation and view of exhibition praxis, which in this particular instance involved a community-based and initiated exhibition. The author's interpretation of this is that whereas the artists and craftspeople were only evaluating the exhibition in terms of the event as possibly a one-off event, the gallery staff may have perceived and evaluated the exhibition from a wider perspective, taking into consideration the on-going professional implications of further projects of this nature. The variation in staff responses to the statements also tends to confirm Wizevich's (1993) findings and conclusion that museum staff were often in philosophical opposition with

each other and trying to achieve different objectives within exhibitions because of cultural differences. This signals the need for further studies focusing on the personal and professional attitudes, values and perceptions of art museum staff and their role within the organisation.

Figure 12.2

Debra Bustin Installation: *House of Spirits*.



(from Mandala: The Immaculate Perception)

Exhibition Theme: Evaluation of Exhibition Components.

Statement 13. The mandala theme was conveyed effectively through the various exhibition components.

Note: Refer to Appendix 9c for Table showing cohort responses to Statement 13.

Analysis

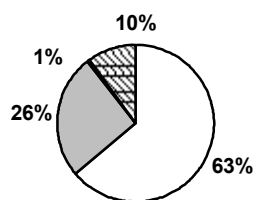
The intention of listing the individual exhibition components under this statement in the questionnaire was to detect whether there were any significant variations with the

perception of the effectiveness of the exhibition components. A similar pattern of response as recorded in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 2 also emerged in the response of the four cohorts. The craft groups, artists and extension cohorts were reasonably comparable and predominantly very positive in regard to the effectiveness of the components in conveying the theme. However, gallery staff were far less enthusiastic overall, although their positive responses (55%) were slightly higher than their negative responses (45%).

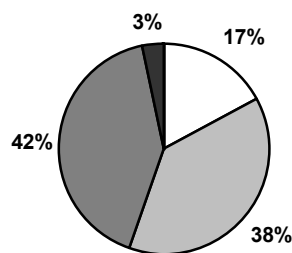
Figure 12.3

Graphs from Table 3 (p.90): Showing total positive and negative responses to the effectiveness of the various exhibition components in conveying the mandala theme.

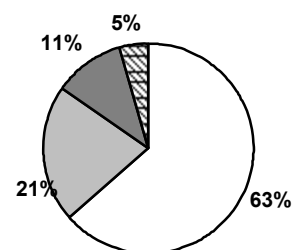
A. Craft Group Responses



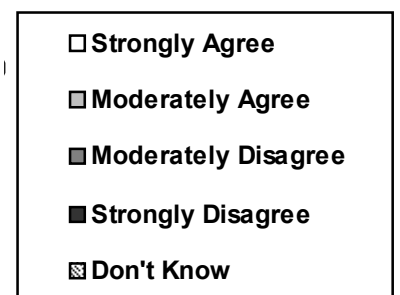
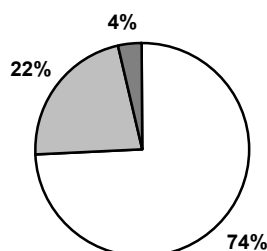
B. Gallery Staff Responses



C. Extension Workshop Responses



D. Artists' Responses



Interestingly, the artists recorded the highest *strongly agree* proportion (74%) as compared to the craft groups and extension workshops, who both recorded the same proportional response (63%). In the gallery staff evaluation of the conveyance of the theme by solo artists, an identical spread of selections emerged as with statement 11,

concerning the mix of artists and craftspeople as fellow exhibitors, with each staff member again recording a different view.

Gallery staff were also divided with regard to the effectiveness of the group works, with two members strongly in agreement with the statement and two members moderately disagreeing. A small minority of craft and workshop respondents wrote *don't know* or an equivalent term on their forms, indicating they had not taken notice of this component (i.e. the computer sight) nor have a clear opinion.

Another interesting anomaly with the gallery staff data were their responses to the computer site and to the interactive mural display that visitors contributed to in the first half of the exhibition. The computer site was considered a positive component by two staff respondents and by one as a negative component. One staff member *strongly agreed* that the interactive mural component was an effective component of the exhibition, while two *moderately disagreed*. Observation within the gallery, as recorded in the tracking data, indicated that these components were very popular with some visitors, particularly young boys and resulted in return visits to the exhibition with their families. The idea of being able to create their own mandala designs printed in colour and have it added to the gallery wall display along with others, had an immediate appeal. The consumption of four colour cartridges during this phase of the exhibition, with minimal evidence of discarded designs, also suggests that a considerable number of designs were taken from the gallery and presumably went home with their creators (see figure 11, p.85). Therefore, from the degree of interaction, this component was a successful component of the exhibition.

Technical Aspects

Statement 6. The technical standard of the works in the exhibition was excellent.

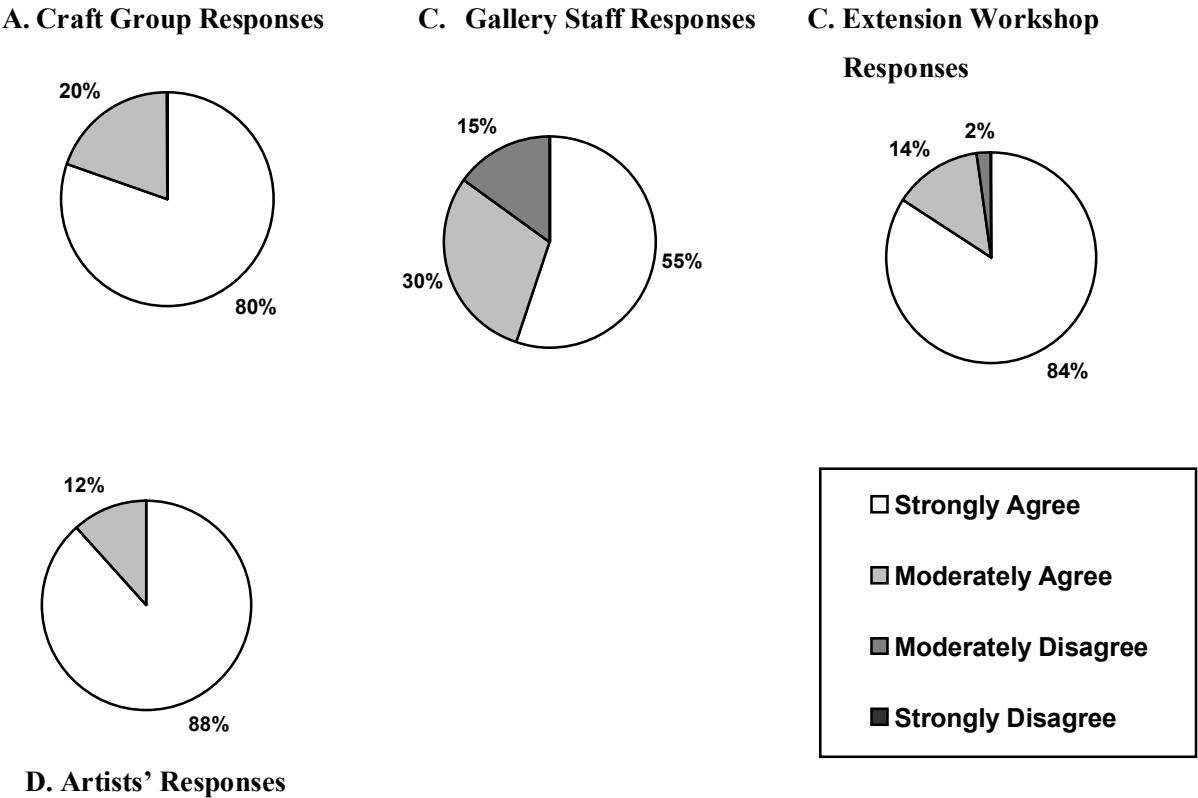
Note: Refer to Appendix 9d for table showing cohort responses to the technical aspect of the works.

Analysis

The respondents recorded an overwhelmingly positive response (94%) to the technical standard of the works on exhibition with a significant majority (73%) strongly agreeing with the statement. The small minority (15%) of negative responses were predominantly from gallery staff focusing on the work of the solo artists and one craft group work in particular. However, the overall response by gallery staff to this aspect of

the exhibition works was very positive (85%). The most positive cohorts were the artists and craft groups who recorded a unanimous positive response with no negative indicators. One artist declined to evaluate the technical aspect of some of the craft mandalas commenting, *I have no ability to assess the technical standard of these works.*

Figure 12.4.
Graphs showing the cohort response to Statement 6.



Future Plans and Aspirations

Statement 10: I intend to work with mandala configurations in my personal work.

Craft groups, artists and workshop participants were asked if they intended to continue to work with the mandala symbol in the future (see Fig. 12.6, p.100). The intention of this statement was to gauge if the exhibition theme was going to have an influential impact on future works for the creators. A positive response to this statement

would reinforce the findings relating to the effectiveness of exhibitions from the creators' perspective (Question 3).

Figure 12.5
Floral Arts mandala



A clear majority of respondents (68%) indicated they intended to work with the mandala configuration in the future. However, those who agreed strongly were a minority (16%) within this cohort. A positive response from an embroiderer included the comment that: *This exhibition has extended my knowledge and basis for design*. A felter noted that, *I can appreciate the flexibility of the concept*". An artist indicated: *I may use the Maori concept of the mandala in future work*. The data indicates that for many of the exhibition creators, working with the theme had influenced the direction of their personal work in a positive way and would continue to provide a source of motivation.

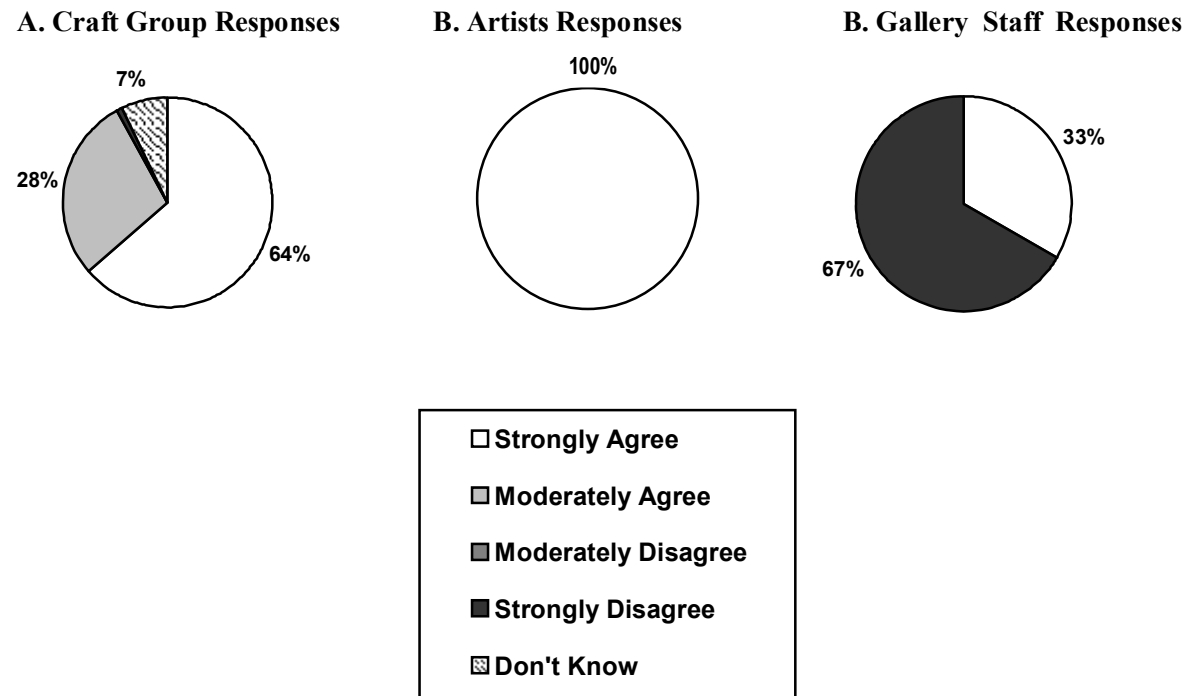
Comments from participants clearly not intending to continue working with the mandala symbol (32%) emerged mainly from the embroiderers: *"I've had enough for a while"*; stated one. Another observed, *"There is life beyond the mandala"*; and one suggested *"not necessarily, but now feel more comfy using them"*.

Statement 12: I would like to be involved in a similar exhibition project if the opportunity arose.

This statement pertains to the correlation between exhibition creation and museum effectiveness (Question 4). A positive affirmation of this statement would provide a clear message that this approach to exhibition creation by art museums would be a direction worth continuing for further community-based projects.

Figure 12.6

Graphs showing participant's interest in future projects.



The artists were unanimous and well over 90% of the craft cohort agreed they would like to be involved. However a small number were unsure of their response and recorded *Don't Know* (7%). One commented: *Yes... the theme was interesting for me and one that could be expanded on in concept, or revisited in a completely different manner.* While a floral artist considered: *Working with a like-minded group is always an enriching experience.* And another stated: *I thoroughly enjoyed working on this project for the floral*

art club and exhibiting in the art gallery. It extended our skills in another way of designing and thinking of our plant material.

The minority (16%) view to the contrary came mainly from the majority of gallery staff who clearly did not wish to be involved in a similar exhibition project, although one staff member did strongly support the idea. One craftsperson also responded: *“Don’t want to be pinned down at this stage. Embroidery is often a lone performance”*. Another commented, *not at this stage- but may change.*

Figure 12.7
Craft objects displaying mandala design symmetry.



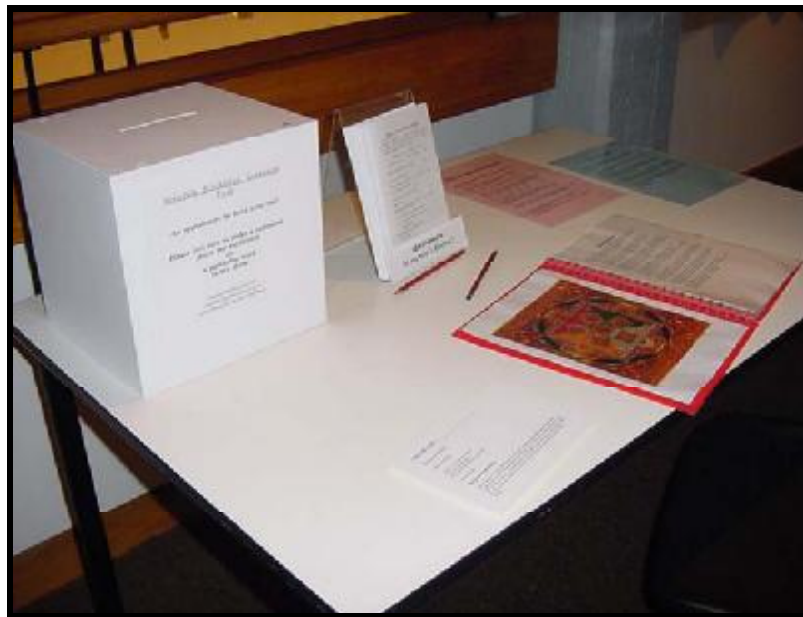
The predominantly negative response by gallery staff to the question of further involvement in such projects although consistent with their responses emerging throughout the evaluation is nevertheless surprising, given that this was a ready-curated community exhibition requiring a relatively modest amount of work by the staff, apart from that specified in the exhibition contract agreement. The independent views of the three other stakeholder cohorts in this evaluation data clearly indicate that the exhibition was deemed to be highly successful. Therefore, the question arises as to why the gallery staff were as negative to the idea of being involved in a similar future project. Such a

finding has implications for the art museum and will be addressed further within the discussion (Chapter VII, p.128).

Part Two: Exhibition Visitors' Response

Figure 13.

Exhibition Desk Site : With evaluation questionnaires, collection box, information folder ,cards and pencils.



Introduction

Three visitor evaluation questionnaires were conducted during the exhibition. They were completed on a voluntary basis at one of two desk sites within the exhibition space. The questionnaires were conducted at different stages of the exhibition.

Also available at the desks were background information in the form of information folders and a number of copies of A4 size laminated coloured cards, with a simple guide to looking at mandalas. There was also a general note about the perception and classification of 'art' and 'craft' objects, as the exhibition featured a variety of works that while drawing on craft traditions and technical processes, tended to cross the functional or decorative boundary usually associated with the craft disciplines into the

aesthetic realm of the visual arts. This note was included on the double-sided *How to look at Mandalas* cards that could be hand-held and carried around the gallery.

Table 4. Showing details of questionnaire evaluations.

Evaluation	Content	Exhibition Time Frame	Respondents Analysed
Questionnaire 1	Questions 1 – 9	During first 2 weeks	$\eta = 94$
Questionnaire 2	Questions 1 – 9 plus 10 - 16	During following 4 weeks	$\eta = 61$
Questionnaire 3	Questions 1 – 9 plus 10 –16 plus 17 - 25	During final 2 weeks	$\eta = 53$

Rationale for Questionnaires

Questionnaire 1

The first questionnaire (Appendix 7a.) was a short ‘One Minute’ pilot to collect selected demographic data from visitors and to gauge their initial response to the exhibition within the first two weeks of opening. Ninety-four respondents completed short questionnaires. Problematic questionnaires including those not sufficiently complete (eight in total) were eliminated from the analysis.

Questionnaire 2

The same nine questions (with slight adjustments) from the first questionnaire were included in the second questionnaire along with a further eight questions designed to provide a slightly more detailed demographic data base and gauge the visitor response and ‘reading’ of the exhibition messages. This questionnaire also provided more opportunities for visitors to include additional comments providing useful qualitative feedback. Fifty-five of these long questionnaires were analysed and a further twenty-six problematic questionnaires being discarded.

Questionnaire 3

The final questionnaire (Appendix 7b) included the sixteen questions from the second version as well as an additional nine questions that focused on evaluating the

individual exhibition components. Although this expanded version was available during the final weeks of the exhibition, the majority of respondents comprised two target groups involved in the project by the researcher. The first group was made up of the twelve adult extension workshop participants (Chapter VI, p.87). The second was a group of tertiary students ($n=24$) enrolled in the researcher's graduate primary teaching training programme and who were completing the visual art component of their programme. It was considered that this relatively long questionnaire would be overly time-consuming and too detailed for most casual visitors. Therefore, the respondents were mainly drawn from the two target groups with the additional numbers being made up from interview visitors and casual visitors responding independently.

Prior Knowledge

Before introducing the graduate students at the College of Education to any background information to do with the project they were asked to write down what they thought a mandala was. Their responses were collected and the art lesson then proceeded with an introduction to the theoretical and cultural aspects of the mandala design. Students were then involved in creating their own mandala designs in a variety of media. At the end of this studio session the students were introduced to the evaluation questionnaires and encouraged to attend *The Immaculate Perception* exhibition at Te Manawa Art, complete the questionnaire and deposit it in the gallery collection box.

As this group had not been subjected to any previous presentation or instruction about the mandala, the researcher considered them an ideal cohort to gauge the extent of prior knowledge concerning the symbol.

The comments revealed that exactly one third of the graduate students had no idea what a mandala was. Responses included: *a type of paint brush; a small animal; musical instrument; a type of head covering from the Middle East*. These responses correlate with the proportion of craft group participants (35%) who were also unfamiliar with the mandala concept at the researcher's initial presentations.

Another third of the respondents had visited, or were aware of the *Tibetan Sand Mandala*, and considered it a Buddhist symbol. The final third indicated some understanding of the structural, or conceptual, nature of the symbol. For example, some responses were; *Sometimes a meditational object; A creative expression of the inner self*

often symbolized by the use of a circle; Usually an object, circular, within a circle, symbolic of spiritual states.

Although it is not valid to predict with certainty from this data as the student and craft group cohorts are not representative cross sections of exhibition visitors, their overall response does provide an indication of the likelihood of a lack of prior knowledge in a significant number of visitors to the exhibition. On this basis, it could be estimated that at least a third of the visitors to the exhibition, would not have prior knowledge of the mandala symbol.

Visitor Evaluation Findings and Analysis

The demographic data from the visitor evaluation reveals some interesting correlations with the McDermott Miller (1996) study focusing on non-users. *First-time* visitors (Falk & Dierking, 1992) to the mandala exhibition made up 36% of the cohort. This is exactly the same proportion of “non-users” McDermott Miller found comprised the “domestic market” (p.1). There were other demographic correlations with McDermott Miller’s findings concerning age and ethnicity of respondents. For example, 17% of the mandala visitor respondents were sixty or over. A further 8% described themselves as Maori and another 11% of the respondents were of another ethnic minority. These findings correlate with McDermott Miller’s cohorts of those non-users “least likely to visit” (p.1).

The majority of respondents (72%) in the present study (see Table 5) were female. While the male cohort was reasonably evenly distributed age-wise, the majority of female respondents (79%) were aged between thirteen and thirty-nine.

Table 5. Showing age and gender of visitors to the exhibition N=208

Age	70 +	60-69	50-59	40-49	30-39	20-29	13-19	~ 12	%
Female	n=9	n=17	n=11	n=18	n=23	n=29	n=27	n=16	72%
Male	n= 0	n=10	n= 6	n=10	n=10	n=8	n=4	n=10	28%
Totals	n=9	n=27	n=17	n=28	n=33	n=37	n=31	n=26	
%	4%	13%	8%	13%	16%	18%	15%	13%	

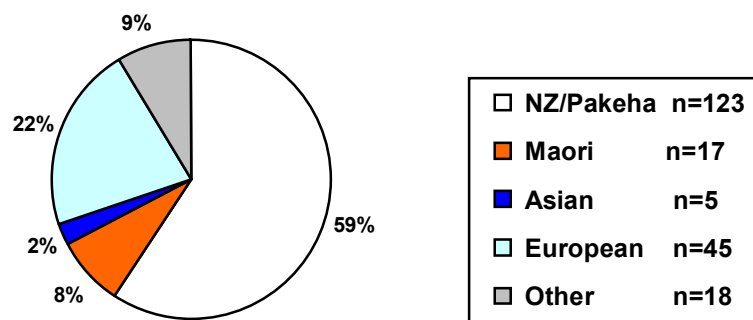
Over half of the respondents (59%) considered themselves *New Zealand / Pakeha*, with a further 22% selecting the term *European* to describe their ethnicity.

Figure 14.1

Showing responses to Question 15 : What term best describes your ethnicity?

(100% of sample answered)

N=208



Long questionnaire η = 114

Short questionnaire η = 94

While the ethnicity-related data is not unexpected, the age spread and relation to gender is surprising given the general seniority of most of the craft group exhibition creators. Although there was a high ratio of females represented in the respondent data, it may have expected that an exhibition of this nature would attract a greater audience from senior peer group friends and relations rather than the younger age bands, as indicated in the data. The relatively high proportion of students attending and filling out questionnaires (42%) may be a contributing factor. However, it is not possible to accurately gauge the audience composition based solely on a voluntary questionnaire. A large number of the more senior members of the community were certainly present at the opening event, and were observed in attendance throughout the exhibition period suggesting that possibly older visitors are less likely to respond to questionnaires of this type.

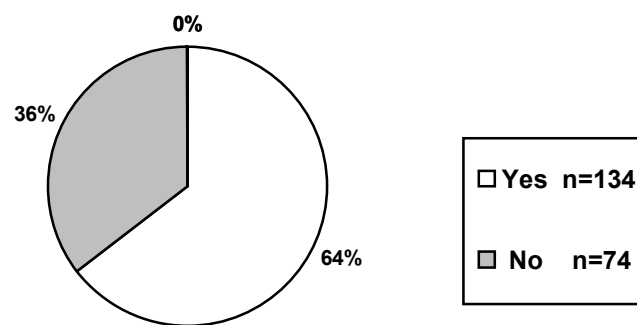
The demographic profile of the ethnicity of visitors to this exhibition tends to confirm the conventional paradigms of museum users in New Zealand that asserts that the “typical New Zealand museum visitor is pakeha, and in contrast Maori or ethnic

minorities are “least likely to visit” ” (McDermott Miller, 1996, p.1). However, in this survey no attempt was made to measure educational or economic advantage which McDermott Miller found can challenge other aspects of the conventional paradigms that focus on occupation and income. The researcher considered such questions to be too personal to be included within the voluntary questionnaires and may have been a deterrent to visitors completing the forms. This was also the reason the ethnicity question being included towards the end of the questionnaire.

New and Returning Visitor Ratio

Figure 14.2

Showing responses to Question 2 : Have you visited the Manawatu Art Gallery before?



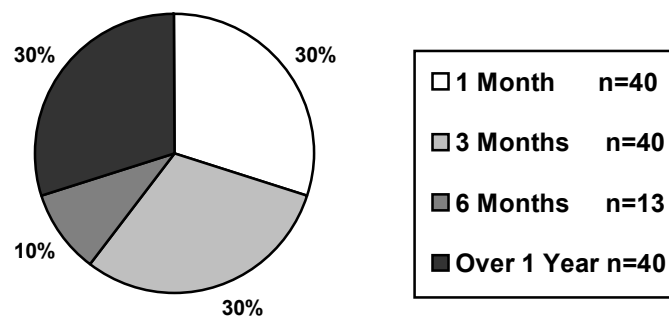
(100% of sample answered) N=208

Just over a third of the respondents were first time visitors to Te Manawa Art, while the majority of the respondents had visited the art gallery prior to coming to the mandala exhibition.

Visiting Patterns of Returning Visitors

Figure 14.3

Showing responses to Questionne 3: When did you last visit the Manawatu Art Gallery?



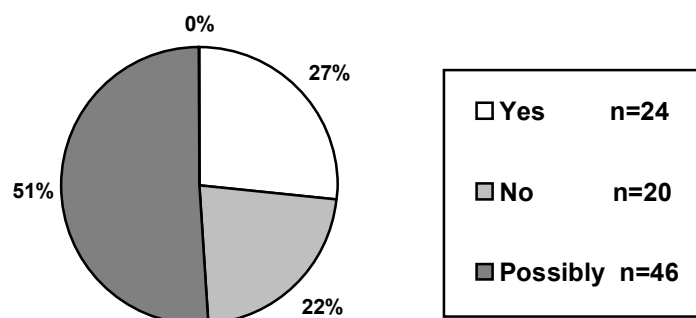
(100% of sample answered) N=133

Sixty per cent of returning visitors respondents had visited the gallery within the last three months and could possibly be termed *frequent* visitors. Exactly half of these had visited the gallery within the last month. Almost a third of the respondents who had not visited within the last year (30%) were clearly *occasional* visitors (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.17).

Figure 14.4

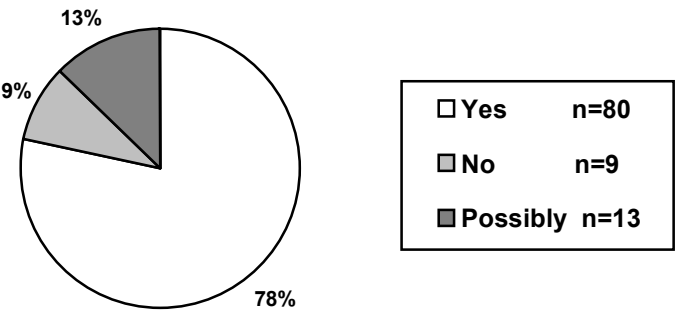
Showing responses to Question 16: Do you think you will visit again?

Question 16 a. The mandala exhibition



Question 16 b. Te Manawa Art

(88% of sample answered) N=90



(90% of sample answered) N=102

Over three quarters of the respondents (78%) indicated they would definitely visit the gallery again, with a further 13% thinking this was a possibility.

Of the *first-time* visitor cohort, over a third (35%) said they would visit again, with a further 14% (predominantly out-of-town visitors) thinking this was a possibility. A number of overseas visitors (7%) indicated their regret at not being able to visit again.

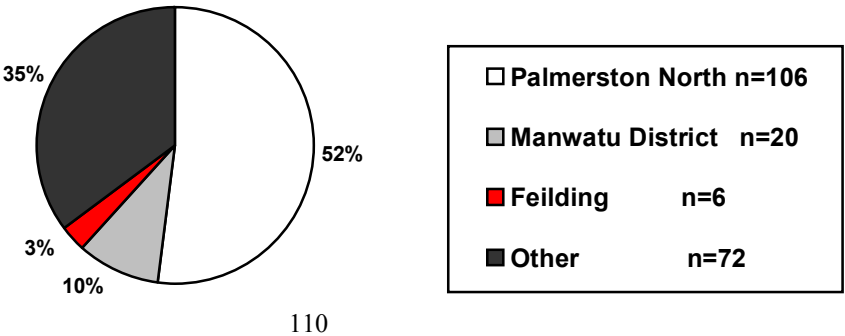
Over a quarter of the respondents (27%) indicated that they would definitely visit the mandala exhibition again and almost a half of respondents (46%) thought the likelihood of re- visiting was a possibility. Of the *first-time* visitor cohort, 33% recorded that they were either intending to visit again (14%) or considered it a possibility (19%).

Visitor Areas

Figure 14.5

Showing responses to Question 13. Where do you live?

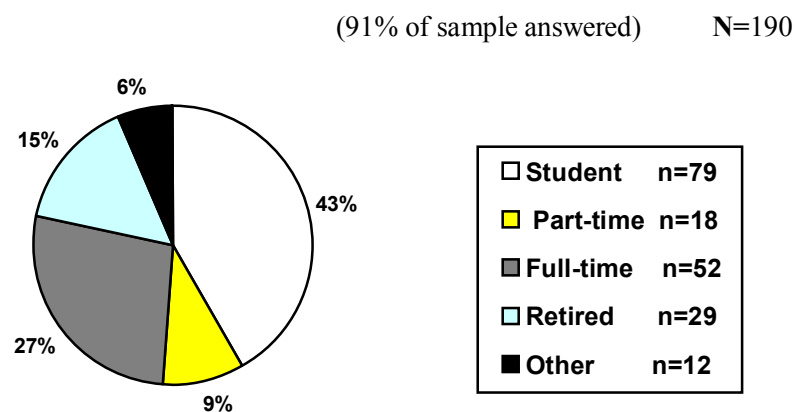
(98% of sample answered) N=204



A slight majority of respondents (52%) came from Palmerston North with a further ten per cent coming from the surrounding Manawatu District. Seventy-two of the respondents were visitors from other New Zealand locations or international visitors. These comprised Lower Nth Island (8), South Island (3), Wellington (9), Levin & surrounding regions (27), other distant cities & regions of NZ (20) and International (11). A surprisingly small number of visitors were recorded from Feilding, the closest and largest rural town in close proximity to Palmerston North.

Figure 14.6

Showing occupations of respondents (Question 14).



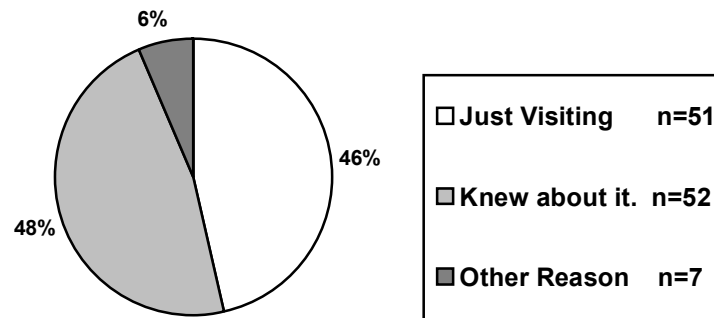
The question asking respondents to select their usual employment status was included to get a general idea of the audience composition in terms of their stage in life, rather than gather detailed information concerning income, occupational status (i.e. blue collar/white collar) etc.

The respondents were predominantly either students (42%) or in full-time employment (27%). A significant fifteen per cent were retired. Those in part-time employment made up nine per cent of the respondents with a further six per cent being either self-employed or unemployed. A number of student respondents also indicated they were in part-time employment, in which case only the student factor was counted.

Finding Out About the Exhibition and Reason for Visiting

Figure 14.7

Showing Respondents reason for visiting the exhibition (Question 6).

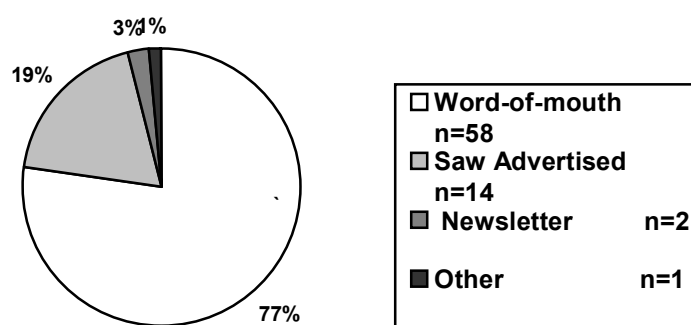


(98% of sample answered) N=110

Almost half of the respondents came to Te Manawa Art to specifically visit *The Immaculate Perception* (48%) and this was proportionally equivalent to those visitors who were *just visiting* and came upstairs, finding the exhibition by chance.

Figure 14.8

Showing how visitors found out about the exhibition (Question 7).



(66% of sample answered) N=75

The question concerning finding out about the exhibition confirmed Adams' findings (cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.28), that *word-of-mouth* is the most significant influence in attracting visitors. Of the respondents answering question seven, over three

quarters (77%) found out by *word-of-mouth*. A further 19% saw it advertised in a newspaper, with a relatively small number (3%) finding out through the gallery newsletter.

Tibetan Mandala Influence

Figure 14.9

Graph showing respondents who visited the *Tibetan Sand Mandala* (Question 4.a)

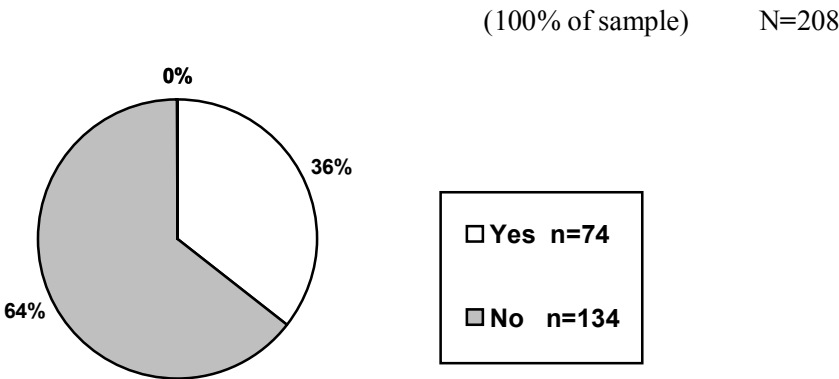
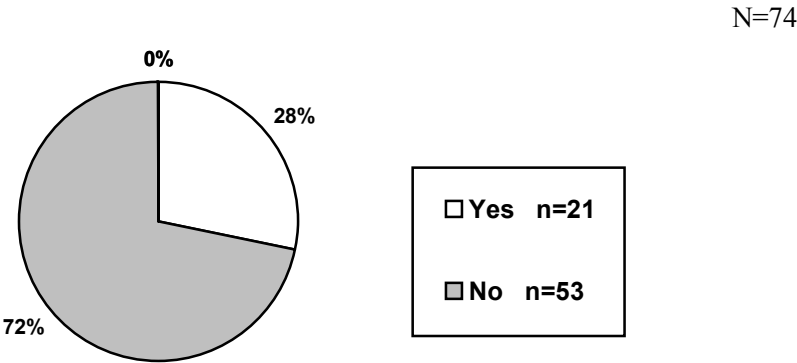


Figure 14.10

Graph showing responses to Question 4b: Is that why you came to this mandala exhibition?



The *Tibetan Sand Mandala* event, earlier in the year, had been visited by a just over a third (36%) of the respondents. However, only just over a quarter of this cohort (28%) considered this was the reason for visiting *The Immaculate Perception*. Other

reasons for visiting included, knowing someone in the exhibition, coming with friends or family, or being informed by a teacher or lecture.

Response to the Exhibition

Table 6: Showing respondent responses to the exhibition (Question 8).

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>%</u>		<u>Responses</u>	<u>%</u>
Interesting	$\eta=144$	72%	Boring	$\eta=18$	9%
Has Variety	$\eta=89$	45%	Complicated	$\eta=15$	7%
Fascinating	$\eta=87$	44%	Confusing	$\eta=14$	7%
Educational	$\eta=70$	35%	Didn't find out much.	$\eta=11$	5%
Relaxing	$\eta=69$	35%	Too many words.	$\eta=11$	5%
Challenging	$\eta=38$	19%	What's the point?	$\eta=4$	2%

(96% of sample responded) N=200

Listing the responses to this question (Q 8) in terms of most preferred, to least preferred options reveals a distinct clustering effect. The total number of selections (570) represents an average of 2.9 selections per respondent to this question. The most popular term to describe the exhibition was *Interesting* (72%) with almost three quarters of respondents selecting it. The next most preferred options occurred with the terms *Has Variety* (45%) and *Fascinating* (44%) and were selected by almost half of the respondents. Over a third of the respondents (35%) selected the terms *Educational* and *Relaxing* to describe the exhibition. A significant drop occurred to the next most selected term, with almost a fifth of the respondents finding the exhibition *Challenging*.

These responses are for terms that can be interpreted as having positive connotations in terms of visitor response. The final six terms listed in Table 6, gave visitors an opportunity to record negative responses to the exhibition. The terms were distributed randomly in the question format, to elicit deliberate selection. The negative terms all recorded less than ten per cent of the total responses, with most being significantly less. This finding is graphically displayed in the bar graph (fig 14.11).

Figure 14.11

Showing Table 6 displayed as a bar graph.

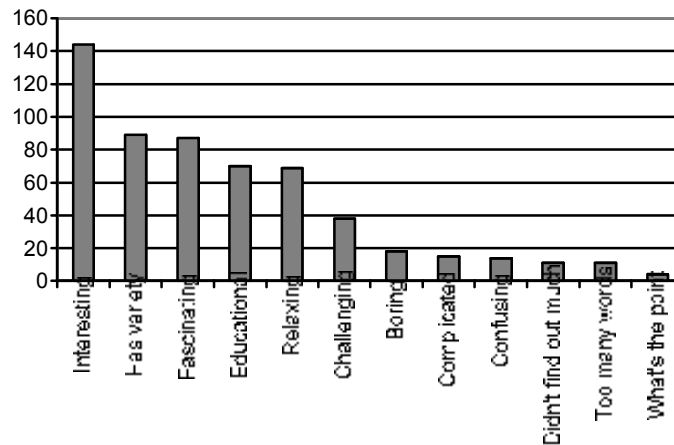
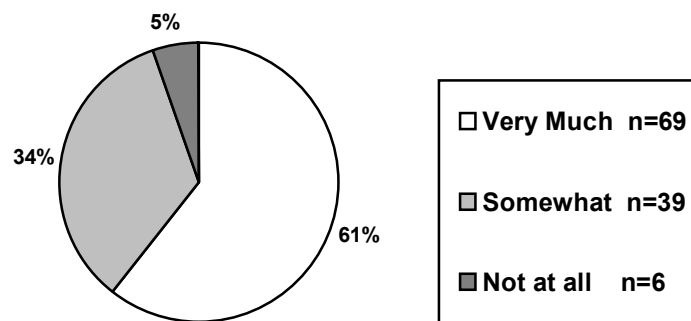


Figure 14.12 **Graph showing respondents enjoyment of the exhibition (Question 9).**



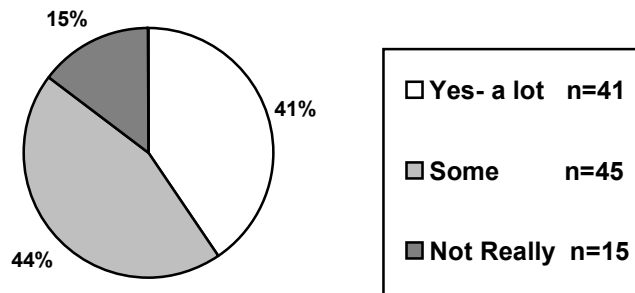
(100% of sample answered)

N=114

Enjoyment was a positive factor with 95% of the respondents. The majority (61%) enjoyed the exhibition *very much*, with 34% most others enjoying it *somewhat*. The small minority who did not enjoy the exhibition (5%) predominantly considered the exhibition *boring* (Q.8). This group comprised mainly younger visitors. However, one male (aged 50) penciled in the word *crap* (Q8) with the comment, *mandalas are raped in the interest of visitor numbers*.

Figure 14.13

Showing visitor interest in the exhibition information (Question 11).



(88% of sample answered)

N=100

Question 11 was included to elicit a more in-depth response about the information content of the exhibition. This question pertains specifically to information content that requires memory recall, rather than the general impression gained by the responses to Question 8 (p.109) indicating that 72% of the respondents had found the exhibition interesting.

On this basis, a satisfying proportion of respondents (41%) considered they had found *quite a lot* of information particularly interesting, with a slightly larger number (45%) finding *some* of the information particularly interesting.

The 15% of respondents recording a negative response to the information content is a little higher than the negative cluster response to the exhibition overall as gauged in the word list, which was under 10% for each of the negative words (p.114). This is possibly explained by those respondents who viewed the exhibition in the mode of interested *cruising* rather than *intensive looking* (Falk & Dierking, 1992). In this mode visitors tended not to take the time to read labels, information cards, or interact with the computer site.

Exhibition Components: Questionnaire 3

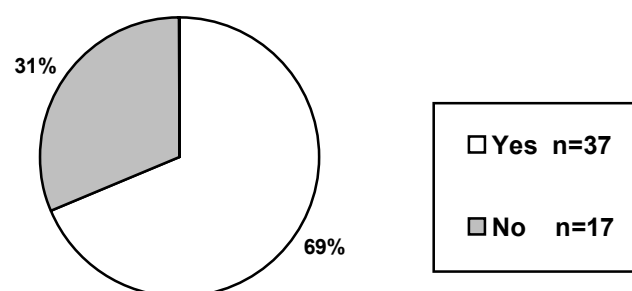
As explained previously (Chapter VI, Part Two, p.103) an additional nine exhibition component questions were added to the longer Questionnaire 2 and were completed by the two target groups who made up 60% of the respondents. The balance of respondents (40%) comprised other gallery visitors coming during the last two weeks of the exhibition. (Note: at this stage of the exhibition the computer site had been removed as required by the terms of loan from the business sponsor. Therefore, it does not appear on the components list).

Evaluation of Exhibition Components

Figure 14.14

Graph showing responses to Question 17: Did you read the Art or Craft Card?

N=54



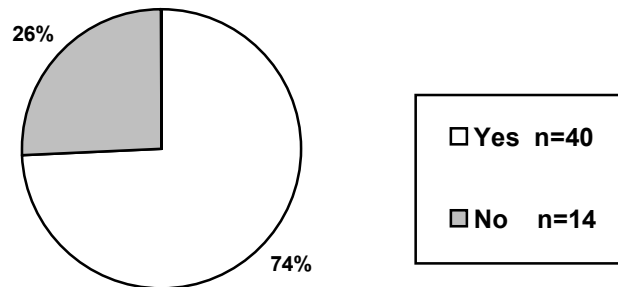
Overall respondents were very interactive with the information cards and labels. Almost three quarters of the respondents (74%) had read *How to see a mandala* and 69% had read the *Art or Craft?* card.

Many comments pertaining to the mandala were included. For example: *Gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation of each work; Offered me a different way of looking at it- made me see it in a new way; It helped you to view each mandala thoroughly – rather than just walking past; Yes, focusing on periphery gave mandala life and three-dimensionality.*

Figure 14.15

Graph showing responses to Question 19: Did you read *How to see a mandala card*?

N=54



The response to the art/craft aspect was more subdued, with fewer comments and mostly confirming the respondents' previous views. For example some comments were: *I have long considered craft is art; Always thought quilting and embroidery etc was an art. It is creative but uses craft as its medium to convey the art; Of course art and craft are entangled.*

Figure 15.

Visitor reading information panels.



Evaluation of Information Labels (Q 23, 24, 25.)

A large majority of the respondents (94%) reported reading the artists' information wall labels and almost all respondents (98%) found them easy to read. A significant majority (94%) had also found the wall labels either interesting (65%) or very informative (29%). However one respondent in the cohort who found the labels *boring* commented: *A little too wordy, too much jargon.*

Figure 16.1

Graph showing response to Question 23: Did you read the artists' information wall labels?

N=53

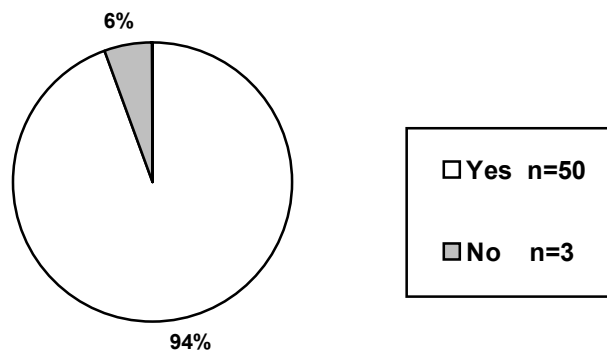


Figure 16.2

Graph showing response to Question 24: Did you find the labels easy to read?

N=54

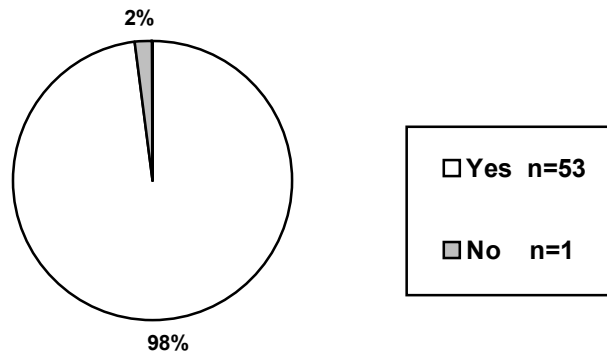


Figure 16.3

Graph showing response to Question 25: Were the labels informative?

N=55

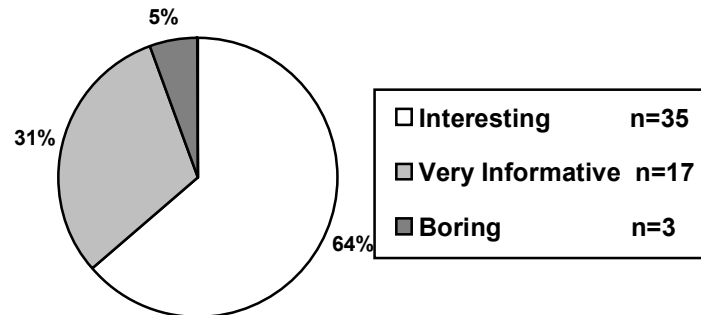
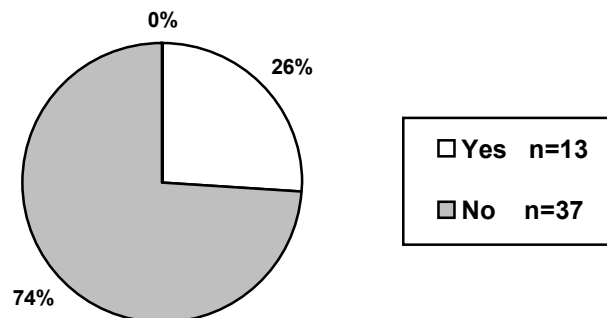


Figure 16.4

Graph showing response to Question 21: Did you read the triangular information columns?

N=50



The *triangular columns* containing general background information relating to the phenomenon of mandalas in nature, in other cultural contexts and in children's art, appeared to receive less attention from the respondents, with only 26% of respondents reporting they had read them.

The reasons for this result is not clear, although it could possibly relate to many respondents not being aware that the term *triangular columns* in the questionnaire referred to the information panels within the exhibition (refer to fig. 15, p.118). Several commented along the lines of this respondent: *Didn't see these – where are they?* This assumption is also supported by the data relating to the perception of the exhibition

themes and messages, which suggests that a significantly higher proportion of visitors read the triangular columns. Many comments included in Questionnaire 3 responses underline the messages conveyed on the columns. For example: *Universality of mandalas in children's work*, and *Mandalas in nature*.

Visitor Perceptions of the Exhibition Themes and Messages

Overall the respondents conveyed a clear indication that they had picked up on the major exhibition themes and messages (Chapter III, p.56). The total number of selections (406) represents an average of 4.3 selections per respondent to this question.

The majority of respondents (66%) considered the mandala a *universal symbol*, and a *spiritual* dimension of mandalas was perceived by over half the respondents (53%). The occurrence of mandalas in *nature* (44%) and the *circular* nature of the designs (41%) also came through strongly with the next most frequently ticked options.

Table 7: Showing respondent selection of statements relating to exhibition messages

(Question 12)

(82% of sample responded)

N=94

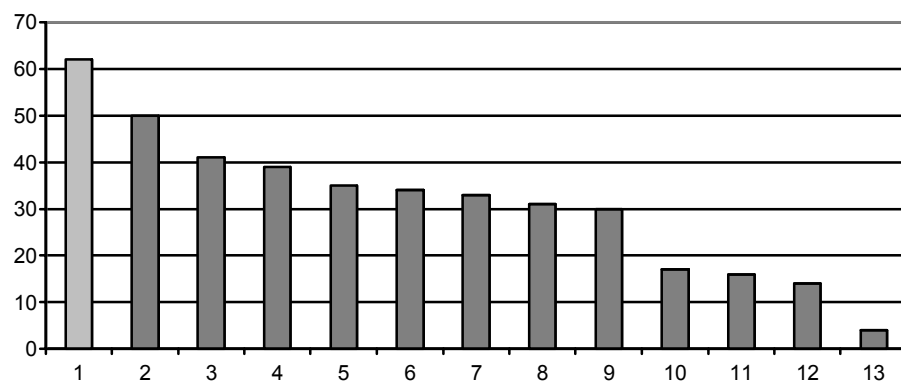
Statements	Responses	%
1. The mandala is a universal symbol.	62	66%
2. Mandalas are Spiritual.	50	53%
3. Mandalas are nature's patterns.	41	44%
4. Mandalas are circular designs.	39	41%
5. Craft mandalas can be art.	35	37%
6. Mandalas focus the mind.	34	36%
7. Mandalas are geometric patterns.	33	35%
8. Looking at mandalas takes time.	31	33%
9. Mandalas are ancient.	30	32%
10. Lots of people are into mandalas.	17	18%
11. Mandalas are fun.	16	17%
12. Mandalas are Buddhist symbols	14	15%
13. Only artists can create mandalas.	4	4%
Total number of selections	406	

Respondent selections then created a cluster of five options, selected by a third or more that were within five per cent of each other (see figure 17.1, p.122). The acknowledgment of *craft* mandalas as *art* (37%) was at the top of this cluster. The perception that mandalas *focused the mind* (36%), were *geometric* (35%), were *ancient* patterns (32%) and *took time to look at* (33%) comprised the other responses in this cluster (refer to Table 7, p.121).

There was a distinct drop in number of the responses in the next cluster of three options. The respondents perception of the mandala as a predominantly *Buddhist* concept appeared to be eclipsed by this exhibition, with a significantly low proportion of respondents (15%) selecting this option. Although a high proportion of visitors considered the exhibition very enjoyable (Q.9), the perception that mandalas were *fun* (17%) was also at the low end of preferences.

The perception that *only artists can create mandalas* was the least preferred statement with only 4 respondents selecting this option. This was a positive outcome, indicating that the creation of mandala designs had possibly been de-mystified by the exhibition. Contributing to this result was the wide community involvement in exhibition including the interactive display of *Make your own mandalas* by visitors generated at the computer site in the first half of the exhibition period (figure 19, p.128).

Figure 17.1
Table 7(p.120) represented as a Bar Graph showing respondent perceptions of the exhibition.



Tracking

Forty-one visitor tracking charts were plotted over an extended period during the exhibition. They were conducted on a random basis on various days and times, in order to gather a spread of responses. However, due to gallery visiting being very quiet in the mornings and the researcher's schedule, the studies were undertaken predominantly in the afternoon and on the weekends. Some of the tracked visitors were also interviewed, which contributed an added dimension to the *informal assessment* data collection (Doering, 1992, pp.70).

Although other studies have identified predictable visitor behaviours (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Russell, 1995; Serrell, 1998), the intention of this aspect of the exhibition evaluation was two-fold. Firstly, to assess how the *structural* and *organisational* features (Golbeck's taxonomy, cited in Frank, 1992, p.64) performed within the exhibition environment in relation to visitor response. The second intention was to provide complementary data to the visitor questionnaires.

The initial observational tracking and early analysis of questionnaires (formative analysis) was also used to make minor adjustments to the exhibition layout. These included providing an additional table, chair and information folder for visitors, as well as distributing the *How to look at mandalas* (Appendix 8) cards at various points around the gallery, rather than only having them at the entrance to the exhibition.

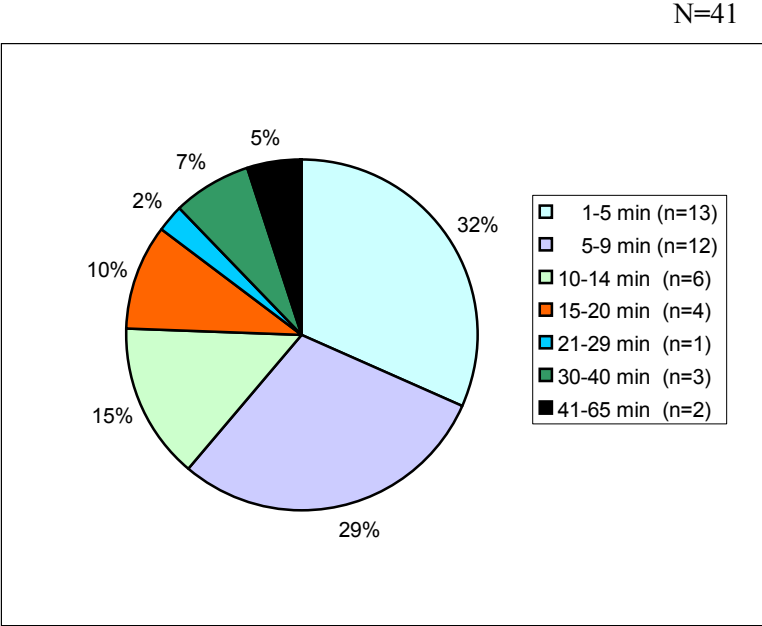
Findings

The completed individual plotted tracking sheets were grouped primarily on the basis of time spent within the exhibition space. Other factors, such as the visitors' patterns of movement through the space (circulate or linear), degree of engagement with particular exhibits and visitor demographics (female / male / adult / solo etc.) were also recorded along with the time spent.

General findings from the tracking (figure 17.2, p.124) indicate that a majority of visitors (61%) spent less than ten minutes in the exhibition space. A quarter of those tracked (25%) spent ten to twenty minutes in the exhibition. A further 9% stayed in the exhibition for up to forty minutes, and 5% were engaged by the exhibition for up to an hour or more. The observational data collected during these studies show that the 24% of

visitors who spent over fifteen minutes in the exhibition were engaged in sustained ‘intensive’ looking (refer to Appendix 10c.).

Figure 17.2
Tracking Data: Graph showing time ‘tracked’ visitors spent viewing exhibition



These visitors tended to be predominantly females who were visiting with a friend and discussed particular works at length. However, those visitors that stayed over thirty minutes also included a number who spent time engaged on the computer site and included a number of males and younger visitors.

Summary

A high degree of variance of visitor movement through the exhibition space was recorded on the visitor tracking sheets. There were several contributing factors to this pertaining to the actual *physical boundaries* of the space which impacted directly on the design and layout of the exhibition. The three possible entrances to access the exhibition located upstairs (Gallery 5) were a definite factor. Most visitors came through the front entrance by walking upstairs, although a significant number also made their way into the

exhibition via the stairs at the opposite end of the gallery. A few visitors, either elderly or wheel-chair bound, also used the lift access.

A limitation on wall space resulted in the placement of one artist’s work in a side corridor wall of the gallery, creating a ‘cool spot’ within the exhibition. Unfortunately, nothing could be done to correct this. However, subsequent tracking observed a number of visitors (12%) involved in *intensive looking*, who also included these works in their visit (refer to Appendix 10c).

Figure 17.3
Showing patterns of movement through exhibition space.

N = 41

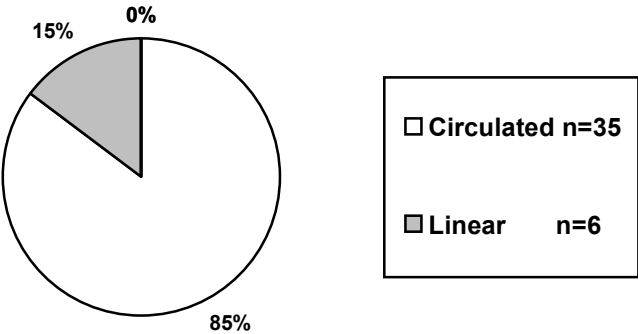
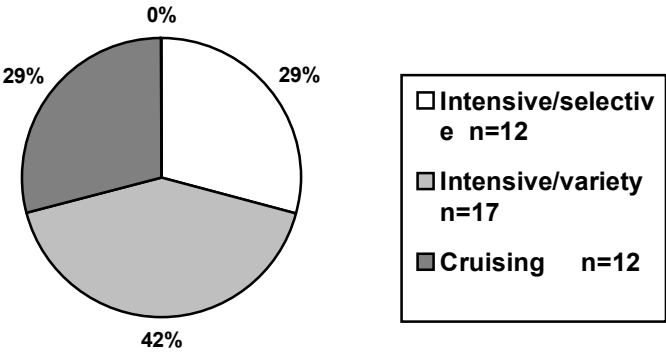


Figure 17.4
Showing degree of visitor interaction with the exhibition components.

N=41



The pattern of visitor movement through the exhibition space, regardless of the time spent viewing, was predominantly observed to involve a circulating route (85%),

rather than a linear route (15%). The *clustering* and juxtaposition of the various exhibition components and the variety of media appeared to add to visitor interest and engagement with the works and labels.

The majority of those tracked were solo visitors (63%), although over a third comprised mixed groups, including families (37%). Informal interviews identified three families who had been encouraged to visit the gallery by their young sons, following a school trip and had wanted to return to the gallery, to create another mandala on the computer site.

The Immaculate Perception was a relatively small exhibition. However, the number of visitors *cruising* (29%) was less than a third of those tracked and confined predominantly to visitors spending less than five minutes in the exhibition. A significant majority of tracked visitors, including those who came into the exhibition by chance, were observed *intensely looking* (71%) in either a selective manner or viewing a wide variety of the individual works and exhibition components.

Figure 18

Peter Roche light sculpture : *Point Blank*



The average time spent in the exhibition by those tracked was thirteen minutes. The two longest visits, of around an hour, involved visitors engaged with the computer site. In contrast, the briefest visit was thirty seconds (a linear, rear entrance visitor).

Although a number of visitors were observed interacting with the hand-held *How to view a mandala* cards, reading them was apparently not a prerequisite for *intensive looking*. The individual mandala art works appeared to engage the viewers in a number of ways (the visual image, the materials used, the background labels) with ‘holding power’ thus creating an *intensive looking* experience (refer to Ch.1, p.27). One younger visitor, a seven year old girl, told her father “this is my special one”, referring to the floral art mandala. Another visitor, an Elam art student, spent his entire first visit (18 minutes), focused on one particular work, Peter Roche’s aluminium and fluorescent light mandala *Point Blank* and returned a short time later for another encounter (12 minutes) with the same work.

The viewing cards did have an impact on those visitors that took the time to read them. The positive visitor comments and high use reported in Questionnaire 3 (p.116), was borne out by observing sustained *intensive looking* in a number of viewers (including *first-time* visitors) whose tracking patterns and notes, record extraordinary movement patterns within the gallery space. The suggestion on the hand held card (Appendix 8) was to view the mandalas from different distances and use a sustained peripheral focus termed *paravisual flooding* by Dewdney (1986) as well as moving in close to appreciate the detail of the work. The resulting tracks reveal a zig-zag interaction with many of the art works, along with sustained and focused pauses, by a number of visitors (Appendix 10 c.).

A number of tracked visitors recorded as short visits (less than 10 minutes), were very selective in their viewing, which involved *intensive looking* and included visitors specifically returning to view a particular work or two. At times this experience also involved a close examination of the materials (including touching / turning over fabric etc.) and discussion, if they were with others.

Data gathered from observational tracking and informal interviews provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of the structural and organisational features of the exhibition components and into the visitor engagement and interaction with the exhibition overall. This information complemented and supported the data provided by the visitor

questionnaires and confirmed the positive feed-back on the exhibition components reflected by the findings of the questionnaire responses.

Early feed-back from questionnaires revealed that almost half of the visitors to *The Immaculate Perception* had arrived at the exhibition by ‘chance’, having visited Te Manawa Art and had wandered up the stairs into gallery five. This information was passed on to the gallery staff, with the suggestion that a sign be placed in a visible location on the ground floor to inform arriving visitors of the exhibition upstairs. However, the recommendation was not acted on.

Figure 19

Visitors’ mandala design display.



The findings from the current study give rise to a number of implications for art museums that will be discussed in the following chapter. This concluding chapter will also present a summary of the study and return to a discussion of the four research questions in relation to these findings that provided the focus of the present study.

Chapter VII

Discussion and Conclusion

The trick for public policy is to keep dangling a carrot in front of art museums' and other cultural institutions' noses in a way that keeps them trying to expand contact with their publics when the data suggest that it is extremely difficult. The trick for the art museum is to continually challenge itself. Neither of these will come easily. The forces that lead to a particular audience composition are powerful and robust. Either a completely new type of institutional form or a completely new type of public policy may be required.

(Schuster, 1995. pp.136-137)

Introduction

This chapter begins with a general overview of this exhibition project from the author's viewpoint. The findings related to the action research methodology are briefly summarised. The framing research questions that relate to the three broad issues outlined in the Introduction and expanded on in Chapter I are then discussed in relation to findings resulting from the study. A number of implications resulting from this study, for Te Manawa and other regional art museums, are also discussed and a number of recommendations made. The study concludes with the development of a theoretical model linking organisational frameworks and cultural change within museums that also arose out of the present study which, in the author's view, provides a basis for the re-visioning and praxis of art museums.

This present study examines the factors that contribute to the curation of an effective community exhibition and relates this to the mission and culture of museum organisations. From the author's perspective *The Immaculate Perception* was not only relevant in concept, but also very timely as an event on the exhibition calendar. The relevance was linked to the exhibition providing a contextual model of learning (Falk & Dierking, 1992) that was as much an event of social significance as it was a personal

event, for both the exhibition makers and the exhibition receivers. The timing of the exhibition, in following the *Tibetan Sand Mandala* soon after that event, contributed to the experience. Many of the participants and visitors indicated had been inspired or enriched by the earlier mandala exhibition at Te Manawa Life Museum, and to have the opportunity to be involved in either making a mandala, or viewing a collection of other variations of the design while the Tibetan experience was still fresh in their minds, may have contributed to a deep learning experience.

Two examples illustrated this, although there were many others. The first was provided by a visitor to the exhibition who wrote on their questionnaire: *I am at last, so pleased to see this gallery being used to its **full potential**, staff contributions, variety, community ownership etc. etc. well done!* The second came in a note from Robyn Parkinson, one of the participants, following the exhibition, to inform me that *Quilted Journey* (p.60), the work she had created for the mandala exhibition, had been acquired by the prestigious American Craft Museum. This represents the highest accolade of achievement for the artist and her work.

From the experience gained in this study it is clear that the success or otherwise of community projects such as *The Immaculate Perception* depends very much on the commitment, motivation and networking skills of key people within the communicative circle. It is unrealistic to expect that everyone involved will have the same passion for the project. People also have limited time to devote to voluntary community projects and can be wary of becoming involved in ventures they do not identify closely with. Therefore, a strong recommendation to curators intending to work with the community on exhibition projects would be to involve potential participants as early as possible at the programme planning stage. The collaborative process of working with the community also requires diplomacy in establishing dependable contacts and networks. This exhibition project was fortunate to have a number of trustworthy, community spirited, and motivated individuals involved. These individuals also had the necessary influence to get the project underway and the energy to keep the creative momentum going within their groups, throughout the project. The contribution and commitment of these key people was a significant factor in creating a successful and relevant community-based exhibition. The strength of this project lay with the people and the process. Although the outcome was a successful exhibition, the really creative educational processes were initiated through the

presentations, the workshops, the sharing of ideas and the making of art works that occurred off-site.

The secondary phase was the engagement of the participants and the public with the art works in the exhibition. Objects and images in art museums are important, but equally important are the social, cultural and educational processes that occur with the making of art works and subsequently within the exhibition context.

The findings from this study indicate that the action research methodology produced a positive outcome for the exhibition stakeholders. The methodology provided an extremely appropriate and robust framework for the study, involving a number of presentations, workshops and evaluation cycles, within the context of exhibition creation and reception. The participatory and democratic nature of the process, the reflective practice and the capacity to incorporate spontaneous creative episodes and decision-making, also provided a methodology with a strong educational warrant suited to the context of this project. With the fundamental aim of action research being the improvement of practice (Elliott, 1991), the methodology also has the potential to contribute to the evolution of museums as learning organizations (Senge, 1994, 2000).

Action research of the form and scale undertaken in this project is challenging and demanding of time, energy and resources. Personal and professional skills and disciplines in negotiation, organisational management and facilitation were able to be practiced, refined and evaluated on the job. Although Schuster (see p.129) suggests that this mode of working with the community is extremely difficult, in taking up the challenge, the author's involvement in this project indicated that the rewards can be immediate and tangible in terms of the personal and professional experience and growth it makes possible. This study enabled the author to work closely within the community involving artists, craftspeople, museum staff, the business community and the public. The action research approach demonstrated that this methodology can contribute much to the positive development of the professional disciplines involved with exhibition development, project management and evaluation. Thus, further projects involving curators in an action research mode, working with local artists and craftspeople, are recommended as a way of enhancing the role and relevance of regional art museums within their creative communities.

This chapter now returns to the four related research questions focusing on the exhibition audience, the reception of the exhibition, the effectiveness of the exhibition and how an exhibition creation process, involving an action research approach, contributes to the effectiveness of a museum exhibition. These questions provide a basis for an interpretive discussion with reference to the research findings that emerged from the study. Some findings are relevant to more than one question and recur throughout the discussion. Related background events are also included to more fully convey the author's involvement as an action researcher in the field. The related implications for Te Manawa Art and other regional art museums, considering working with their communities during the exhibition creation process and utilizing an action research approach, also emerge in the discussion. The chapter concludes with a discussion around two models illustrating the relationship between the organizational and cultural aspects of museums. The models provide a possible framework for museums seeking to enhance community relations and partnerships, or re-visioning mission statements.

Question 1: Who was the audience for *The Immaculate Perception*, and what motivated them to visit this exhibition?

The exhibition visitor questionnaires indicated that the respondents were almost equally composed of people from within Palmerston North and those from the Manawatu region or beyond. The latter group included a significant number of international visitors (11%) and visitors from other cities throughout New Zealand. Two significant factors emerged from the data on visitor origin from which generalisations may be drawn. Firstly, Te Manawa Art is definitely an attraction for out-of-town visitors, particularly from other New Zealand cities and overseas visitors. Secondly, during the exhibition period Te Manawa Art did not attract a significant following from Feilding (2%), its closest rural town, or the Manawatu District (10%). Almost as many overseas visitors were recorded as these two cohorts combined. This may be related to the exhibition dates falling during a holiday period, or it may indicate a general lack of interest towards the gallery within the rural sector. Further visitor and non-visitor studies would need to be undertaken to determine the patterns of visitor origin and also identify the perceptions of non-visitors within the region and their reasons for not visiting Te Manawa Art.

The finding, that the majority of the respondent visitors were female (72%) and described themselves as NZ/Pakeha (59%) or European (22%), was not unexpected considering the exhibition contents, which included a number of crafts traditionally associated with women, such as embroidery and quilting. The proportion of respondents who came to Te Manawa specifically to see this exhibition (48%) was almost the same as those who were visiting and had come upon the exhibition *by chance* (46%) while *cruising* through Te Manawa Art. However, the majority of all respondents (77%) had initially found out about the exhibition by *word-of-mouth*, which indicates that this was a prime factor in communicating awareness of this exhibition and contributed to the visitor numbers for this exhibition.

This result confirms international studies highlighting the significance of this factor and is slightly higher than the findings of Adams' study (cited in Falk & Dierking, 1992, p.28) in one museum in the USA over an eight year period, showing that between two-thirds and three quarters of all visitors visited museums on this basis. The other main source of information and motivation for respondents in the present study (19%) came from local newspapers whose distribution coverage was encompassed within the Manawatu region. This proportion also correlates with other studies showing that other forms of publicity generally account for less than twenty per cent of visits (Falk & Dierking, 1992).

When the number of word-of-mouth visitors is interpreted along with other data recording the artist's and craft group responses that relate to exhibition effectiveness, indications are that working together with the local community as participants in exhibition projects can also provide a means of including exhibition viewers in the communicative circle. From the author's experience in this study, this occurs naturally through local contacts and associations that develop soon after the initial links and communications are established between the curator, other gallery staff involved and the exhibition creators. Thus, families, friends and the wider community become personally aware of the project and spread the word.

In this way, a potential audience is organically generated, resulting from an interest and curiosity in the individual contributions, as much as the final outcome that culminates with the exhibition opening. In the present study, this interest and curiosity factor may

have also contributed to the findings related to the questions of exhibition reception and the gains for the audience.

The finding that three quarters of the respondents overall were aged under 50 was an interesting result indicating a good deal of interest in Te Manawa Art and in this exhibition by a section of the community that potentially has many more years of gallery visiting ahead of it. These data, along with the increase in visitor numbers overall during the exhibition period, provide extremely useful evidence of the depth and breadth of the audience and would add substantive weight to future museum submissions or proposals to the city council, to potential business sponsors, or to funding organisations, seeking support for further community based projects.

Question 2: What did the audience gain from viewing *The Immaculate Perception*?

The visitors' personal contexts have been identified as having the greatest influence on their experience within a museum (Falk & Dierking, 1992) and are therefore a key factor contributing to the potential gains to be made from viewing a particular exhibition. The demographic data pertaining to the age, gender and ethnicity of exhibition audience already discussed, give some indication of personal context. The visiting patterns of the respondents are also useful indicators of personal context. In this study, it was found that over one third of the respondents were *first-time* visitors and were therefore unfamiliar with the setting and layout of Te Manawa Art. However, a relatively high proportion of respondents (60%) could be classified as *frequent* visitors, having visited within the previous six months. This indication of audience composition provides an interesting spread of visitor context and contributes to the validity of the questionnaire responses.

Visitor recognition of the exhibition messages, along with other responses are measures of engagement and therefore indicators of potential gains. It is very difficult to ascertain the lasting mental impressions or gains, referred to as souvenirs by Frank (1992), resulting from visitor experience of a specific exhibition. The written questionnaire is rather a blunt instrument when it comes to such indicating such specifics. Thus, observation, interviews and anecdotal comments, also provide valuable additional insights into what an audience may have gained from an exhibition. However, a useful amount of

interesting information did emerge from the responses to the questionnaires in this study from which generalisations can be made concerning visitor gains.

The data, as recorded and analysed in the previous chapter (Table 7, p.121), clearly indicated that there was a consistency between the messages intended by the exhibition creators and the viewers' reception. The primary messages (refer to Chapter III, pp.58-59) had been communicated to a significant number of the respondent visitors. The findings suggest that audience identified closely with the exhibition and received the key messages from it (pp. 121-122). The exhibition, featuring a wide variety of interpretations of the mandala symbol from solo artists and community groups of craftspeople in different media, had clearly encompassed and communicated a more inclusive concept of the mandala and broadened the audience awareness of the symbol and ways to express it.

Although there are no data to compare the duration of visits within Te Manawa Art for other exhibitions, it could be interpreted from the tracking data (Fig. 17.2, p.124) that the overall visitor engagement with the exhibition was reasonably successful, with just on 40% of the tracked visitors spending between ten minutes to an hour within *The Immaculate Perception*. This figure includes the 14% of this cohort who spent over twenty minutes in the exhibition space. Considering the modest scale of the exhibition and the exhibition space, these data suggest that in terms of slowing visitors down and engaging them in a sustained visual experience with the art works, this exhibition worked very effectively. The tracking data indicated that the exhibition was visited by numerous groups of visitors who moved through the exhibition together, stopping to discuss (and examine) particular works in detail. These groups, predominantly women, were usually in two's or three's and were interested in the various craft techniques and skills on display. However, family groups were also observed spending considerable time within the exhibition. Thus, the exhibition team had provided an exhibition that many visitors could relate to and established a conducive environment for the social context of the visitors' experience, by acknowledging the visitor's personal context as the "single greatest influence on the visitor's experience" (Falk & Dierking, 1992).

The 'hands-on' computer site was the factor contributing to the cohort of tracked visitors' spending 41-65 minutes in the exhibition space. However as the analysis of the data revealed (see pp.117-128) the other 'hands-on' aspects of the exhibition (hand-held

viewing cards) and the 'holding power' of the art works also contributed to the *intensive looking* experience and therefore the longer visiting times.

Other visitor responses to the exhibition (Table 6, p.115) indicated that nearly three quarters of all respondents agreed that the exhibition was *interesting* (72%) and over a third of the respondents found the exhibition either *relaxing* (35%) or *educational* (35%). An even larger proportion found the exhibition *fascinating* (44%).

Overall, these findings indicate the exhibition was generally very well received by the visitors and based on the surveys and observational studies, the indications are that the exhibition project achieved a positive outcome for the audience. The visitors left the mandala exhibition more aware and better informed about the symbol and the activities of local craft groups and artists.

Question 3: What makes an effective exhibition?

The term effective, as used in this question, is taken to mean having a definite or desired effect¹ resulting from the various aspects of the exhibition project.

The very positive visitor responses to the questionnaires overall indicated that the exhibition made a positive contribution to the gallery exhibition programme over a particularly busy holiday period (pp.114-128). Based on figures supplied by Te Manawa Art, reception head counts also reveal that visitor numbers to Te Manawa Art over the three month period that included *The Immaculate Perception*, as well as a number of other exhibitions, were up 40% (to 7622) from the same period in the previous year (5406). The relatively high proportion of first time (36%) and out of town respondents (48%) to the exhibition questionnaires indicates the exhibition was, at the least, a contributing factor to the increase in visitor numbers. The exhibition included a variety of media and conceptual expressions of the mandala, a user-friendly website that provided in-depth information and the facility to create personal mandalas. The community, was also invited to share in some of the stories behind the project and the creation of the group mandalas. Therefore, the exhibition also contributed to the activity emphasis of Te Manawa's current mission by providing an engaging, interactive and recreational attraction for visitors to the city, as well as the local community.

¹ The Concise Oxford Dictionary: Ninth Edition

Audience engagement and response are significant indicators of the effectiveness of the exhibition. However, an art exhibition involving local participants also has an influence on the expectations and impressions of a variety of stakeholders, including the creators, the gallery staff and other community participants (funding agencies and sponsors) as well as the audience. An effective exhibition could also be one where the creators gained a sense of trust in the relationship with the organisation and management of the project and where the liaison with the curator and the museum was amicable and the creators felt valued. In this study, the craft group surveys indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the different phases of the project during exhibition creation and reception. In the exhibition creation phase, over three quarters of the respondents had indicated that the initial presentations and workshops had provided an essential introduction to the project. This finding suggests that establishing a sense of cohesion and clarity of purpose early on in the exhibition creation phase, contributes significantly to what makes an exhibition effective. In this project, this was an outcome of the collaboration and initial agreement concerning the design concepts developed during the workshops, in combination with the cooperative spirit and partnerships created with group participants. The development of the design concepts, although initiated out of the workshops, was in the hands of the participants from the outset. This contributed to the sense of common purpose and ownership in the project. These aspects were consolidated during the production phase, culminating with positive sense of accomplishment when the works were finally completed and on display.

A large majority of participant respondents (85%) were also in agreement that they had been creatively challenged and almost all (96%) had enjoyed the mandala theme as a focus. The respondents' satisfaction with their completed creations was also very high (97%).

A significant number (70%) of the participants were also motivated by the project to initiate other creative work. More than three quarters of the group participants (78%) also considered that the presentations and workshops provided an essential foundation for their creative work. Therefore, at this stage of the action research cycle it was clear the group participants had responded enthusiastically to the project and its methodology and were clearly motivated in both their group mandalas and their personal work.

The exhibition makers (craft groups and artists) were also extremely positive in their response to the exhibition when it was finally open to the public. For example, a majority (64%) *strongly agreed* that the mandala theme had been *conveyed effectively* by the exhibition. There was also unanimous agreement (100%) that the *technical standards* of the works were also *excellent*. The respondents' positive feelings about the project were underlined by their response to the question of further involvement in a similar exhibition project in the future, with over four fifths *agreeing* that they would like to be involved, which included more than half *strongly agreeing* (56%) with the notion. The artists and craftspeople also indicated a very positive outcome from the exhibition in terms of their understanding, knowledge and aesthetic appreciation of the mandala symbol.

Combining the total evaluation responses of the artists, craft groups and extension group (see Table 3, p.90) that came from using the four point Likert Scale, offering two possible positive responses (strongly agree/agree) and two negative responses (strongly disagree/agree), resulted in a positive response that averaged just over ninety per cent for the mandala exhibition concept and presentation. Therefore, for the artists, craft groups and the extension group, the data clearly indicates that the exhibition produced a positive outcome and was effective and relevant for them.

The responses from the gallery staff cohort are less unanimous and noticeably more negative. In fact almost four times more negative than the other three cohorts combined. Although gallery staff responses in the total evaluation of positive and negative factors also came out as being positive overall (67%) they were significantly less inclined to *strongly agree* with the statements. Further research would need to be undertaken within Te Manawa Art to clarify the staff perceptions and identify whether their perceptions were based on particular aspects of the exhibition concept, for example the involvement of local craft amateurs, or if it was other cultural factors i.e. possible structural tension within the organization, that were a factor. This issue will be returned to further on in this chapter.

The findings (Survey One) that the craft group respondents were almost unanimous (95%) that a role of a public art gallery is to include the work of local artists and craftspeople, also signals that an effective exhibition is one that provides opportunities for the community to see themselves represented in the exhibition programme. A significant majority of this cohort were frequent visitors (69%). Thus, the finding that

almost a third (31%) were unsure about Te Manawa Arts performance in this area and that almost a quarter (24%) did not think they were catering enough for the local community indicates the validity in the current project in providing an opportunity specifically for local artists and craftspeople to see themselves represented in the art gallery..

By involving local artists, craftspeople and business sponsors in exhibition projects and drawing on their creative resources, skills, knowledge and enthusiasm, museums are not only creating exhibitions that the participants can relate to personally, aesthetically or conceptually. The word-of-mouth factor suggests that the wider local community with whom the participants mix on a daily basis also become aware of the project and are drawn to exhibitions out of curiosity. Thus, there is a connection, by association, to the exhibition by the wider community. This view was confirmed by visitor studies in this research project, showing that almost half the respondents in the visitor survey knew about the exhibition prior to visiting and that over three quarters (77%) of these respondents found out about the exhibition by word-of-mouth.

This has two major implications for art museums. Firstly, community-based projects are an extremely effective way to connect directly with people in the wider community and generate interest in the exhibition programme. Secondly, these exhibitions are a potential source of first-time visitors to the art museum and an opportunity to entice occasional visitors back. Data collected in this study support this view. Over a third of the respondents (36%) were first-time visitors and almost a third (30%) of the returning visitor respondents were occasional visitors and had not visited within the previous year (refer to p.109).

An effective exhibition is one that also entices visitors to return. The visitor respondents also indicated a strong intention to visit either *The Immaculate Perception* exhibition or Te Manawa Art again. Of the 78% of respondents who indicated they would definitely visit the gallery again, over a third (35%) of these were first-time visitors. A further 14% of first-time visitors thought that another visit was “possible” (refer to pp.108/109). This provides evidence of the exhibition being successful in either attracting new visitors to Te Manawa, or in providing a positive exhibition experience that had the effect of enticing them to return in the future.

Although the evaluations of Te Manawa Art indicate a staff divided in their responses to the exhibition, it can be argued that the exhibition provided the gallery with a

valuable addition to their portfolio of community-based projects. It also provided the long holiday period, when regional gallery staff generally take their vacation, with a user-friendly, low maintenance exhibition. The fact that visitor numbers recorded at Te Manawa reception over this period were significantly up on the same period in the previous year cannot be attributed to *The Immaculate Perception* alone. There were also a number of other exhibitions on at Te Manawa Art during this time. However, with almost half the respondent visitors coming to Te Manawa Art specifically to see the mandalas, the exhibition did contribute significantly to the increase in attendance. Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that the museum, as a stakeholder, gained both in its programme content and in visitor numbers from this exhibition.

Overall these findings contribute to the understanding of what makes an effective exhibition and gives some insights into the complexity of evaluating exhibition projects involving local communities, during the various phases in the project.

Question 4: How can action research contribute to exhibition creation and enhance its outcomes?

Within this study, the term “outcomes” relates to the museum’s delivery of its mission and goals. As indicated in the introduction (p.19) the mission of Te Manawa has recently been revised and included within a draft Strategic Plan presented to the local city council along with a number of “Defining Commitments”² that includes aspects related closely to this study. It seems appropriate to include this draft mission in the discussion, as it signals Te Manawa’s intention of developing stronger links with the community.

*At the heart of the community, Te Manawa excites imaginations, collects, cares for, and presents its treasures, and gathers and shares knowledge to increase understanding of ourselves and our world.*³

A number of ‘Defining Commitments’ are also included in the draft statement specifically targeting some of the key issues arising in the current study, relating to the

² Te Manawa Draft Strategic Plan, September, 2003

³ Te Manawa Draft Strategic Plan, September, 2003

effectiveness of museum exhibitions. For example, three areas of commitment are to Community (*Engages in partnerships with communities to tell their stories, and responds to visitors' needs and expectations*), to Sustainability (*Allows a diverse range of partnership opportunities*), and as a Learning Centre (*Offers an environment where visitors of all ages and backgrounds can learn through reflection, discovery and interaction*).

The shift in emphasis from the wording of Te Manawa's pre-draft mission, of being "accessible" (p.19), to that of being more inclusive in the revised draft, represents a significant move towards its community. Te Manawa's proposed draft mission has a resonance with the new mission proposed by Worts (1993 b) in relating to the public, reflecting the cultural identity of the community and supporting and affirming individuals in developing their personal identities (see p.10). The current study pre-empted these commitments and provides a case study of these principles at work within the community.

There are a number of implications arising from this study that would impact directly on the organisational culture of the museum, were such an approach to be implemented as part of the day-to-day running of Te Manawa. In the present study, involving a variety of mandala works by local, national and international artists and craftspeople, the curator set out to provide an accessible, enriching and challenging exhibition, with a high degree of community input and support. This required establishing strong partnerships with the stakeholders involved. The visitor studies, as well as indicating the *The Immaculate Perception* exhibition was well supported generally by the community and that the mix of media and approaches had been well received by respondents, also revealed a keen interest by fellow craftspeople in the interpretations and particular techniques, skills and processes of their fellow participants.

The overwhelmingly positive response by the artists and craft groups to being involved in a similar future project (Statement 12, p.101) is a strong indicator of the overall positive outcome for these participants. Te Manawa Art, in agreeing to mount the exhibition and support this project during the exhibition phase, provided a valuable community service. Having the gallery as the exhibition venue, made possible the subsequent dialogue and collaboration between the curator and the group participants during the production phase, as well as, during the exhibition phase, between the artists and the groups.

The exhibition creation process leading up to the exhibition was influenced significantly by the curator's action research methodology. The feedback from the participant questionnaires supports the curator's view that the action research cycles, involving a hands-on approach during the various phases of this project including presentations, workshops and collaborative meetings with the artists and group participants, contributed substantially to establishing and maintaining a sense of unity and purpose for the participants.

The findings (Survey One) that the craft group respondents were almost unanimous (95%) that a role of a public art gallery is to include the work of local artists and craftspeople also signals that an effective exhibition is one that provides opportunities for the community to see themselves represented in the exhibition programme. A significant majority of this cohort were frequent visitors (69%). Thus, the finding that almost a third (31%) were unsure about Te Manawa Art's performance in this area and that almost a quarter (24%) did not think they were catering enough for the local community, indicate that the current project made a significant contribution to changing that perception of the gallery and building goodwill within the craft community at least.

The exhibition creation process required the curator/researcher to work in a variety of roles order to effectively develop the various phases of this project. This was particularly the case with the community groups and the invited artists, and to a lesser extent with the business community. A depth of knowledge on the exhibition theme and familiarisation with a range of media and motivational approaches were essential to the successful facilitation of this project. A sense of trust needed to be established early on with the participants in order to achieve an initial acceptance and ownership of the exhibition concept. In the case of the craft groups, once the agreement to participate was secured, the way was clear the way to build the relationship through the collaborative, participatory workshops, where the role of the curator was that primarily that of a motivator and facilitator. As the project moved forward, developments in the concept and design of the mandala works also involved further discreet collaboration and input from the curator. This was particularly the case with three of the craft groups and to a far lesser degree with the artists. However, the primary reason for interacting with the participants was to keep track of the various creative activities as they developed and to ensure that the exhibition challenges and deadlines would be met.

The practice of disciplines by artists and the disciplines of museum professionals, both require dedication and commitment. Specialised practice leads to the development of particular skills, techniques, processes and knowledge. The personal and conceptual development of an artist is communicated through their work and can be shared with others. Public art museums with their expertise in many aspects of the collection and curation of the visual arts and exhibition design skills are ideal sites for this to occur. With projects such as this study, the professional skills of museum staff can be applied and extended in a community context demanding a new awareness and attitudes that may alter sensibilities and beliefs that affect working relationships and partnerships. An important dimension to the skills that museum staff must have to be successful within their communities is the ability to work with a wide range of community stakeholders. Communication and people skills are key aspects of a museum's effectiveness generally, and become even more significant when exhibitions are undertaken, that involve community partnerships. When these aspects come together to positively reinforce each other, the deep learning cycles of Senge's adapted model (see fig. 23, p.155) can be generated, influencing cultural change for both individuals and groups.

Some exhibitions and art works enhance and enrich the communication experience for an audience more than others depending on the meaning making that occurs during their visits. Therefore, the exhibition creation process is not only related directly to the effectiveness of the final exhibition, but also to the effectiveness of the art museum in general in providing the staff involved and the community with engaging, informative, and challenging exhibitions.

In this study, the action research cycles were found to be an ideal methodology for the exhibition development process. The demographic data gathered also gave indicators as to the current audience profile which provides a useful reference for identifying future target audiences. This further demonstrates the potential value to museums in taking the time to collect such information. Although involving guest curators is not a new idea, in future projects if the museum was not staffed with individuals with sufficient experience or skills to undertake an action research approach, or gather data, then it could consider approaching others with the necessary expertise outside the museum. Within a regional art museum context, given the right project, appropriate support of funding and institutional backup, appointing a guest curator, possibly an artist/ action researcher, could provide a

powerful conduit for further community projects to occur. American artist, Judy Chicago's controversial *Dinner Party* (1979) that involved working alongside over two hundred community women, to commemorate thirty-nine highly significant women in history, provides a well documented example of this principle at work. Therefore, the present study involving the curator as an action researcher working alongside contributors, rather than being a coordinator or facilitator standing outside the creative process, provides a model for further projects to enhance the museum's outcomes in the community domain.

Further Implications & Recommendations

Community clubs and guilds involved in hands on craft and art activities should be viewed as life-long learners by learning organisations. The groups involved in this project demonstrated that established community organisations provide reliable creative networks with the potential to build strong partnerships and provide enthusiastic support for community ventures. They also welcome the challenge and the opportunity to be involved in such projects. Establishing partnerships with such groups also honours the community commitment that appears in Te Manawa's draft mission statement. However, partnerships should also be considered long-term, with the opportunity to build on past achievements and initiatives in future projects, rather than one off events. The subsequent acknowledgement of artists and craftspeople after the event is also important to maintain the goodwill and sense of appreciation created by the event (see Appendix 13).

Learning organisations, it has been suggested (Garvin, 1993) are those that are skilled at creating, acquiring and sharing knowledge and then using this knowledge to modify their own behaviour. The concept of art museums functioning as learning organisations (Senge, 1990, 1994) and environments where artists and other community organisations come together within a communicative circle (Perin, 1992) and work collaboratively with curators and other museum staff on activities and projects, offers a possible model for establishing a creative power-sharing nexus. People learn best through direct experience. Therefore, the participatory aspect of community-based projects is considered to be pivotal to a successful outcome, with the museum providing the appropriate curatorial support and direction if necessary as well as the organisational framework. Museum professionals have particular strengths, knowledge and skills that are invaluable and relevant to community stakeholders and vice-versa. Art museums also have

the resources to work in ways that actively promote life-long learning by involving other community stakeholders as participants in the development of programmes. Ideally, the dialogue should be established at the outset of an exhibition proposal and developed collaboratively to formulate exhibition concepts and aims with target groups within the community. Such collaborations offer the potential to develop enduring community partnerships, particularly if the foundational contacts and the evaluations of the outcomes are subsequently followed up and built on.

For art museums working closely with communities, the question of the degree of control of the project that the museum is willing to entrust to the other stakeholders is a significant issue to be addressed. With the leadership being driven from within the gallery, the question arises as to whether it is possible for museums to ever fully cede control to other community interests. In the present project, for example, the text for the exhibit labels had to be approved and designed by the gallery and even though a recommendation was made by the author to use a larger than usual type face, this was overruled. Museums may wish to get closer to their public and promote themselves as community organisations, but their policies, attitudes and culture may present real obstacles in making a lasting impact in this direction. The mission statement is an obvious indicator of the cultural milieu of an organisation and the place to begin when assessing the relevance and intentions of a museum in relating to its community. How mission statements are expressed and who has input in formulating them are also important factors. Often they are statements constructed internally within an organisation and although they may contain reference to the community there is little opportunity for input from that community. Consultation and collaboration with the wider community to agree on the mission would be recommended as an important first step in getting closer and giving the community a sense of ownership of the process. However, the rhetoric of mission statements is one thing, but delivering effective action on the policy is another.

In working with the community, the process of first meeting and then developing a productive working relationship requires a variety of skills that are not used in formal museum education. Dodd considers that these skills are not concerned so much about “systematic learning” but more with “negotiating, networking and confidence building” (1992, p.31). This view was indeed verified in this study, particularly during the early stages of the project. The initial contacts to invite and convince possible stakeholder

participants to become involved in the project required a significant investment in time to explain the aims and expectations with key individuals. Having successfully negotiated an understanding at this level, the researcher established an initial trust and commitment. With the craft groups, this gave access to the wider club and guild memberships enabling the project to advance to the next stage, involving the presentations and workshops. With the artists, although no workshops were intended, further visits to keep track of progress and developments took place.

This study indicated that curators working with the community on exhibition projects can influence the exhibition outcomes for the exhibition creators, the audience and the museum. Therefore, insights into the complexity and dynamics of the relationships involved with the participants can provide indicators and leads for further project development. In this project, the ‘movers and shakers’ within the craft group organisations tended also to be the creative driving force. They were very self-motivated and creatively challenged by having an exhibition deadline to work to. They were also extremely generous with the time invested in their own creative contribution to the work, as well as organising others to contribute and keep to deadlines. It was evident in this project, that the membership in such clubs and guilds comprised members with a wide range of skills, abilities, experience and confidence. Once there was an agreement from the membership to become involved, the successful managing of the project resulted from working collaboratively with the members. Thus, when the concept, design and production process were democratically agreed upon by the membership, individuals were agreeable to be given appropriate tasks or designated aspects to work on. Following the group’s initial introductions to the exhibition concept, the theoretical background and foundation work, involving visual motivation, interactive group-work and media workshops to get the design concepts flowing, it was essential for the curator to give the participants ownership over the creative process, as much as possible. This also applied to the expressive outcomes.

However, sensitive curatorial intervention was necessary at times and led to learning moments for all participants (including the curator) during certain phases of the production cycle. With a project of this nature these interventions may involve technical, aesthetic or conceptual aspects of the work and can be justified as an integral part of AR

methodology in that the curator/researcher is an “active change agent” rather than a “participant observer” (Bryant, 1996, refer to Ch I, p.46).

The infrastructure and social dynamics of the community groups in this study were such that when motivated and focused on the project, powerful creative group and individual energies emerged and a united sense of purpose carried the project forward. Resources were pooled, tasks assigned and individuals moved into appropriate participatory roles, either as movers and shakers, or as willing aides and contributors to a designated aspect of the project. Moreover, in this project their contribution was voluntary and apart from the curatorial support and input by other gallery staff in mounting and dismounting the exhibition, the actual costs involved for Te Manawa were minimal.

Figure 20

Felted Mandala: Group Work.



However, for future similar projects the resourcing of materials would be an important budget consideration. The funding issues of this project provided a valuable insight into the potential of networking with funding agencies and business ventures. At present, community funding is available through particular trusts and Government

agencies that exist specifically to support such ventures. Although in this project some funding was made available to the groups that enabled a seeding of the project, many of the extra materials and resources required were supplied through the generosity of the participants. A recommendation for follow-up projects would be to establish a comprehensive budget to cover material, production and exhibition costs. Initiatives involving community groups also need to be planned well in advance to accommodate the aspirations and goals of the participants, as well as the museum, the curator and other staff involved.

Museums in the post-modern milieu need to define their cultural and educational role within society; however, museums need to think carefully about what they mean by the term education and what their role is (Tesconi, 1992). Self-directed learning and guided tours represent opposite extremes of standard museum practice in providing an educational dimension. However, art museums as learning environments could be enhanced by collaborating with the wider community education networks that includes teachers, scholars, schools, tertiary institutions and libraries in their approach to their exhibition programme planning. The understanding of curriculum that is emerging in line with a constructivist learning philosophy could also provide an appropriate direction for museums to embrace. For example, Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman (1995) suggest that “the curriculum is not a scope and sequence chart or a list of objectives but rather a process, a journey toward becoming, during which all life experiences are valued for their potential to inform and inspire learning” (cited in Kinchloe, Slattery & Steinberg, 2000, p.325). This educational concept, if incorporated into an art museum’s strategic plan, would not necessarily dominate programme and exhibition planning but rather be on the agenda for consideration during the conceptualising and planning phase of exhibition development and integrated where appropriate. In this way an exhibition could become an interdisciplinary experience with the potential to link opportunities for learning with other aspects of the museum’s programme and with the wider community. For example, extension activities using the museum’s collections and exhibitions as a resource and targeting particular community interest groups, schools, tertiary institutions or artists and craftspeople. To a limited extent a number of our museums currently do this with their emphasis on interactive, visitor centred experiences that involve local communities or

provide meaning-making experiences. Te Manawa's recently introduced⁴ *Get with the programme: learning with the collection*, that uses groups of selected art works as a motivation and focus for related workshops, is a move in this direction.

However, what is being suggested for Te Manawa Art and other regional art museums is a more focused and pro-active approach to establishing a collaborative educational agenda and making it work in an integrated way within the exhibition programme, for the benefit of the community stakeholders.

Drawing on King's definition of culture (refer to Ch.I, p.25), art museums are in a unique position to influence the acculturation of community culture and provide a site for the transmission of new knowledge. The suggested re-conceptualised approach to learning and the exhibition programme planning would place the wider community (including schools, tertiary institutions, libraries, the business community and the local community) around the centre of the museum's educational agenda and thus enhance the potential for both acculturation and the transmission of new knowledge. This would provide a mutually supportive network with the educational community.

Thus, the community context is necessary for the art museum as a learning environment to be more fully realised and developed. In some regional art museums this may necessitate the re-visioning of mission statements. A follow-on recommendation is for specific exhibitions and activities to be developed in collaboration with communities. This would involve identifying target groups or individuals and involving them at the earliest possible stage. The documentation of community projects, including visitor studies and exhibition evaluations that detail demographic, behavioural and phenomenological data is also helpful in validating the museum's implementation of its mission statement and related goals or commitments. Demographic studies within the museum during specific exhibitions are also strategically useful and can contribute to the museum's audience development. The findings in the demographic data in the present study (see p.132) indicating the very low number of respondents from Feilding and the Manawatu District, provide the museum with a potential future target audience and evidence of the value of collecting such information.

In this project, the decision to approach The Eastern and Central Community Trust, and the Creative Communities New Zealand grants through the Palmerston North

⁴ 2003

Community Arts Council was necessitated by the limited financial support from Te Manawa. Budget restrictions and other priorities meant that the museum could not provide an exhibitions budget beyond the provision of labels, signage, advertising and refreshments for the opening. The success of both applications guaranteed that the project went ahead. Consequently, the funding stakeholders were given due acknowledgement in the signage at the entrance to the exhibition and invited to attend the opening of the exhibition. The two business sponsors, Desktop Technology Services Limited who supplied the *Imac* computer equipment and Unlimited Realities who assisted with compiling the interactive site and installing the *Mandalamaker* programme, were also acknowledged both at the entrance to the exhibition and on the computer site. Their representatives attended the exhibition and were very enthusiastic to be associated with the educational dimension of the exhibition.

Figure 21

Rt.Hon. Steve Maharey (Minister of Social Services & Employment, Associate Minister of Education, Tertiary & Minister responsible for Community and Voluntary Sectors) engaged with the mandala computer site.



The development of community-based exhibitions and related initiatives within an art museum requires experienced, skilled and enthusiastic curators and facilitators who understand the participatory potential and educational warrant of the project in relation to the overall mission and aims of the museum. Such exhibitions contribute much to enhancing the relevance and development of the museum as a learning organisation. A positive start for a regional art museum wishing to enhance their involvement with their local community would be one major initiative a year. The issue accountability of public funded assets is coming under closer scrutiny within New Zealand, particularly by the Chief Executives of regional councils and rate-payers wanting evidence to justify their annual rate demands (see Appendix 12). This is a trend that has already influenced policy changes in some of our museums and is likely to continue to become more of an issue for our regional museums. The Dowse Art Museum, for example, came under close scrutiny from its community focused council a few years ago, which put the museum under real pressure. This led to a complete revision of its mission statement and a refocusing of its relationship and relevance to the visitors and non-visitors within the local communities. Museum staff involvement was an integral part of this process. They were given the brief to draft a revised Mission Statement (see Appendix 11a.) and also involved in re-branding their organisation. A key aspect of their new mission is the emphasis on creative partnerships with producers, supporters and communities (Appendix 11b).

The director through this period, Tim Walker, reports⁵ that this process has resulted in closer partnerships with a wider variety of stakeholders, including business interests. Walker refers to himself as a cultural entrepreneur and considers that the community is a huge asset. He considers benefits have come out of “thinking hard” about his community. The Dowse has subsequently become a more invigorated, proactive, and innovative art museum. This inclusive dimension to the exhibition programme also extends to the organisation, promotion and hosting of an annual hip hop music festival targeting local Pacific Island and Maori youth. This event has grown to include exhibitions of graffiti art, films and advertising billboards. This is not the type of event that is traditionally associated with an art museum, but is further evidence of a regional art museum putting the policy resulting from re-visioning into practice. Following the success of their refocused strategies involving community partnerships, their local city council has

⁵ Personal interview at the Dowse Art Museum, 30 August 2002.

subsequently demonstrated confidence by financially supporting proposed expansion plans of the art museum complex.

The re-wording of mission statements and re-branding exercises on their own will not necessarily bring an art museum and its community closer together. This can only be achieved if words and policies become action and are put into practice. A lesson from The Dowse is that it is essential to start the changes at a personal level from within the museum and involve staff in effecting any change in attitudes, policy or practice. This is also the fundamental principle of the Senge's model of the learning organisation (see pp.40-42) with its concept of cultural change being dependent on personal disciplines that are constantly being worked on. Management changes and reworked policies have a very short shelf life unless the individuals, groups, or teams within organisations are working together. Adapting Senge's (1994, 2000) concept for a museum context (fig. 23, p.155), places learning at the center of the organisation and the domain of action (including the policies and practices, including internal information and authority networks) would be designed around this.

In the present study, the variations in responses to the exhibition evaluation by individual Te Manawa Art staff members signals that their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions were inconsistent with the views of the other survey cohorts and also at times with each others' views. This finding also highlights the significance and impact that individual staff can have on professional and community relationships. Personal meanings are legitimately diverse and open to interpretation within a constructivist learning framework. However, within the context of this study, the disparity in gallery staff views raises questions about their unity, their awareness of the mission and perception of their role within the museum organisation and in the wider community.

Wizevich's (1993) study in six New Zealand museums linked the "philosophical opposition" (p.223) between museum staff working on exhibitions (curators & designers) to the actual, rather than the intended visitor response. Thus, she concluded that the exhibition creation process structures the relationship between the "providers and the visitors" (p.223). This present study adds weight to Wizevich's findings and conclusions. Another contributing factor to this disparity of views could lie in a "structural tension" (Wood, 1993, p.36) related to differing staff perceptions of the art museum's purpose in society. Wood also connects this tension to fundamental philosophical problems that arise

within the museum community, with some institutions aiming to attract larger audiences with more popular blockbuster exhibitions. The perceived trade-off between aesthetic quality and the freedom of expression on one hand and popularity and the entertainment industry associated with the larger audiences on the other, can lead to a firming of positions and elitist attitudes that inhibit progress in the democratisation of the museum environment.

Although the blockbuster scenario may not be applicable in the case of Te Manawa staff and their responses to this exhibition, there may be some aspects of the structural tension argument that do apply. The findings indicated the gallery staff were around three times more negative and four times less positive in their views, relative to the other respondents (refer to Table 3, p.90). Unfortunately, they did not include comments to explain their responses to the evaluation questionnaire. However, the clear message from gallery staff was that apart from one member, they did not wish to be involved in a similar project (see fig.12.6, p.101). This finding tends to indicate that Te Manawa management wishing to implement their new mission, involving more community based partnerships, may have a problem in successfully implementing this policy change within the visual art programme. Anecdotal comments from a number of local artists also suggest that it is very difficult for local artists to exhibit their work at the gallery. The exhibition programme record (see p.19) tends to support this view. Although around two thirds of Te Manawa's twenty-five exhibitions were recorded as being curated 'in-house', only two solo exhibitions featuring a local or regional artist were shown. However, five group shows supporting educational institutions in the city were also exhibited (including *The Immaculate Perception*).

The adaption of Senge's model to influence cultural change within the museum through deep learning cycles offers a possible way forward for museums wishing to address the attitudes, beliefs and awareness of gallery staff and their relationship with their creative community. In this model (fig. 22, p154) the domain of **action** within the organisational framework guided by the mission and the domain of **change** (of attitudes, beliefs, awareness, skills and capabilities) continuously influence one another. Within the museum context, such a model if implemented could significantly influence established practice, make inroads into elitist attitudes and potentially enhance the working environment.

Figure 22

Showing the relationship between individual and group cultural change and the domain of action within a museum organisation.



Adapted from Senge's concept (refer to p.32).

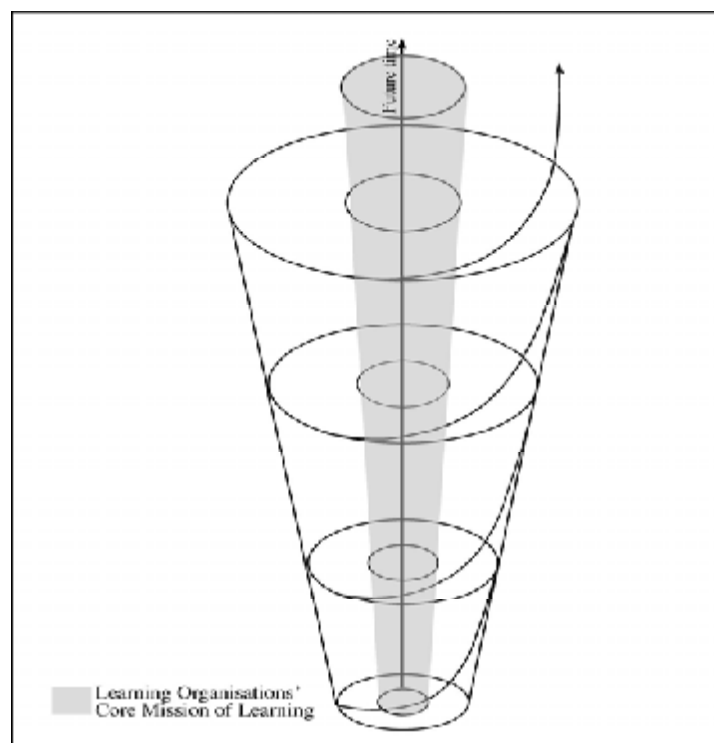
When the concept of the communicative circle is added to this model, the wider community can be considered an integral part of a web-like mandala, connecting the various actions of the learning organisation. All community stakeholders could potentially be involved in contributing to the learning, including museum curators, designers, education facilitators, technicians, voluntary staff and friends of the gallery.

In this model, communication is understood as a cultural process linking the community and the art museum. The emphasis on action and learning is in resonance with the underpinning aims of action research to improve both the understanding of practice and the practice situation. Therefore, it is proposed that action research methodology is an appropriate epistemology and framework within which to effect change within the learning organisation. Further, by integrating the action research cyclic model (fig.6, p.49) with the concept of the museum as a learning organisation, this gives rise to an enhanced concept, of *the communicative spiral*. Also in this model, museums are conceptualised as being positioned on a continuum of action and reflection cycles with the potential of

creating an evolving and expanding communicative network (fig. 23). Moreover, art museums would function with their mission and praxis encompassing a variety of learning contexts, involving their staff and their communities. This would fundamentally influence the cultural milieu of the museum and provide the philosophical foundation and direction of their exhibition programme planning involving community interaction. Developing existing partnerships and establishing new partnerships within its communities would be a key aspect of interaction. Museum staff and other targeted community individuals or organizations (e.g. artists, craftspeople, teachers, schools, universities and libraries) could join forces for specific projects and work collaboratively within the domain of action and learning at the centre of the communicative spiral.

Figure 23

The Communicative Spiral, showing action research cycles contributing to the core mission of learning.



However, working more closely with communities and expanding educational roles has implications for staffing, work-load issues and resources. The time may be approaching when regional galleries such as Te Manawa may need to seriously consider the scale and scope of current and future exhibition programmes. Mounting fewer exhibitions, but using them in a more integrated way, by designing extension activities and targeted programmes around them, could be a direction that would provide more opportunities to work collaboratively with the community.

For museum staff working within the learning organisation model, community based initiatives would also involve reflecting on the nature of personal practice within the organisational framework, in relation to the museum's mission. Thus, a key aspect of working within the museum profession would be the development of group and personal initiatives. These initiatives, by individuals or collaborative teams, could generate new forms of enquiry and action by motivated staff. In addition to developing appropriate missions and goals, a key aspect of museums being relevant and effective, in terms of their cultural and educational contribution to their communities, it is also important to enhance their organizational culture by providing staff with opportunities for the development of their personal and professional disciplines. Within this context, the future role of the curator could potentially evolve into a significantly more pivotal and pro-active one. The background, qualifications and on-going training of curators would need to be appropriate for the responsibilities and expectations of this leadership and facilitation role. The job description for curators and other museum staff would also involve the development of praxis through personal and professional development.

Along with the wider implications of identifying themselves as learning organisations, art museums would also need to reconsider the implications for staffing and the appointment of new staff. For example, at times the curatorial responsibilities may need to be considered as a shared responsibility within the organisation, with the professional and financial flexibility to involve expertise from the wider community at specific times, for specific exhibition projects. This approach may pre-empt the likelihood for overloading the job descriptions for curator appointments with prescribed mission responsibilities and duties that have the potential for leading to fatigue and burn-out.

The conceptualising of the art museum as a learning organisation also provides the means to dismantle authoritarian management structures and elitist attitudes where they

exist and to influence the cultural milieu of museums. For more than two decades the art museum has been the focus of critical theory. Critics have called for changes in the vision, mission and organisational structure of the art museum and urged them to devolve to the scale of their local communities. Few of these critics offer models of how that re-visioning could be implemented or evaluated in order to deliver the community-based cultural and educational mission of the museum. This particular study is a small step in this direction and offers a glimpse of how challenging and rewarding re-visioning the curator role and working with the local community can be when put into practice. The study also presents empirical evidence to support the rationale for an alternative model in the praxis of the museum and the curator. The implications raised by this study, if acted upon by a regional art museum, could lead to a more accessible, collaborative and responsive organisation that related closely to the aspirations and grass-roots of its creative community. This would in turn contribute to the relevance and hence the long-term viability of the art museum within the community.. The models developed in this study provide a discussion framework for museums willing to commence or continue their journey in this direction.

Figure 24

Exhibition visitor with Peter Roach mandala in the background.



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