This is Felicity Morgan interviewing Professor Ian North on Monday, 11th January 2010 at his home in Adelaide about his contribution to the development of the arts in South Australia during Don Dunstan’s Premiership, particularly in the field of visual arts. This recording is being made for the Don Dunstan Foundation Oral History Project and will be deposited in the Flinders University Library, Don Dunstan Special Collection, and in the State Library of South Australia.

Good morning, Ian, and thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

My pleasure.

I wonder if we could start by you giving me a brief personal background: are you South Australian by birth and by education, and so on?

No, I started my education and career in New Zealand. I was Director of what is now the Te Manawa Museum in 1969–1971 – very young, I was only twenty-four when appointed; a boy in short pants, you might say! – but from there came to the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1971 as Curator of Paintings. The position might have been called ‘Keeper of Paintings’ initially, I can’t remember. But that meant in effect all European, American and Australian paintings and sculptures.

Yes, you told me that your first title was ‘Keeper of Paintings’, which was rather quaint and old-fashioned, and I wonder whether that reflected the Gallery at the time: was it also rather old-fashioned?

Well, it was in many ways, as was the Adelaide art scene, although the Gallery I have to say was changing. John Baily was the Director at the time of my appointment, he appointed me, for which I’m eternally grateful, and he was trying to pull the Gallery out of its nineteenth-century slumbers. I remember Philip Fargher – he died last year, did you interview him?

No.

Okay. But I remember the late Philip Fargher said that some of the trustees of the Board of the Gallery at that stage treated it like an extension of the Adelaide Club. (laughter)

I’m not surprised to hear that.
And the collection was rather British-oriented in terms of the overseas collection, the international collection, and had very little very contemporary work in it of any stripe at all. So I saw my job, although notionally it dealt with all painting and sculpture from the European and Australian and American traditions, to focus very much on the contemporary end of things as well as building the Australian collection.

The Australian painting collection in particular, I have to say, was very strong at the time and has become steadily stronger ever since, I’m pleased to say. The Gallery has been well-served, as it happens, over the years, in spite of its conservatism prior to the late ’60s, by a succession of curators and directors who were very open to Australian art and the Australian painting collection, even when I started at the Gallery in 1971, was considered by some knowledgeable experts to be probably the best-balanced of all the state galleries in Australia: a very high-quality collection and best-balanced, whereas the collections in Sydney and Melbourne, the most obvious ones to compare it with, were more parochial, even though they had very important works as well.

And the quality of the collection here, was that due to a long line of excellent benefactors?

Benefactors to some extent, but also directors and curators, in particular Louis McCubbin, for example, and then Robert Campbell was a Director with some sensibility, an amateur artist – well, more than an amateur artist, he would blanch at that description – and then Lou Klepac and then myself. I think we were all open to issues of quality and balance and fairness and equity and all those sorts of things, so the collection grew very effectively.

Getting onto the subject at hand, you started in 1971, very shortly after Don Dunstan’s election as Premier, and when you first started and when he came to office the Gallery was under his direct responsibility, I understand. It was not part of any other department, it was a little entity on its own.

That sounds correct. Yes, I believe that was the case.

Did you have any personal contact with Don Dunstan as a result of him being, if you like, minister in charge of the Gallery?
Very little. Contact was very much confined, I would say, to him and the Director meeting. I don’t think he even had that much contact with the Board of the Gallery, as far as I’m aware. Because John Baily was an open-minded and generous-minded person, he actually gave me a very free hand. I only remember once being upset by him rejecting a recommended purchase on my part. It was actually a von Guérard painting, which of course has escalated hugely in value, so I think I was right and I think John was wrong, as it happens. (laughter)

Who got it in the end?

The Art Gallery of Western Australia got it. A wonderful, wonderful painting. But John, in a way, was perfectly justified: the dealer concerned, Frank McDonald, was known for his high prices and it did seem a bit over the odds at the time, even though in retrospect it would have been a bargain. (laughs) So only one instance that comes to mine in nine years is pretty jolly good – I mean John was very, very – well, he was Director for the first four or five years of my time there.

Yes. Now, just tracking back a moment, on the subject of acquisitions of course that meant funding. Are you able to give me any indication of how generous the Don Dunstan Government was in terms of funding? From having started in ’71 I guess you didn’t have that much prior knowledge of what the funding levels had been under Steele Hall, for example; do you happen to know whether Don Dunstan was more engaged and therefore more generous, if you like?

I’m not sure about the facts and figures. It’s interesting to contemplate this, I should have done some reading for you. (laughs) But my general gut impression is that we were reasonably satisfied with the nature of what was called the ‘government grant’, the annual funding for the acquisitions. I think it ran to – I don’t know, I really am only guessing – but maybe $20,000 a year or something like that. It’s certainly a contrast to the situation today where the Gallery has to raise its own funds and rely much more heavily on benefaction and sponsorship and that kind of thing.

So my impression was that the Government was moderately generous. It certainly didn’t give us enough money to purchase in the Old Master area, which we would like to have built up, of course – all galleries would – and it’s good to know that the
Gallery has subsequently managed to build up in that area, moderately impressively, really, for an Australian state gallery; and also in the Colonial art area. But the government grant was sufficient to purchase – you know, carefully – in the Australian Contemporary or Modern 20th Century area, but also to purchase modestly, but again selectively and effectively, in the international art arena, and that’s what I set out to do. Now, given that the money was just adequate to do a few things with, and given that I had a very free hand from John Baily and that that was part of the atmosphere created by Don Dunstan – because it was all interlinked, I’m quite convinced of that: Don’s interest in the arts, Don’s open-mindedness towards the arts, his interest in contemporary art or his openness to it, all helped create an atmosphere whereby John Baily felt comfortable giving me a free hand. And I had a very free hand, when I think about it I was in a remarkable position. I felt in a way that I had more effective power over purchasing and governing the direction of the collection than he himself did, through his delegation to me, which was very, very good of him.

One thing I did was to, in a very early overseas trip, my first overseas trip from the Gallery in 1972, was to, without consultation with anyone, bowl up to Ronald Alley, a curator at the Tate Gallery in London, and ask him if he would be a spotter for us in terms of purchasing contemporary artwork in London, and I did the same thing with John Stringer, an Australian who unfortunately died a year or so ago, who was working at that stage for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, so I had two very highly-placed and effective spotters to select work for the Contemporary collection and I was able to recommend purchases to the Board, to the Director and Board, through them, which certainly did a lot to update the collection and give it for a while perhaps the strongest contemporary art profile of any gallery in Australia, any publicly-funded gallery in Australia.

And this desire to building up the Contemporary collection, did that come from John Baily or from you or was there anything coming down from Don Dunstan, do you know, at the time?
I’m not aware of anything specifically from Don Dunstan, and John was, as I say, sympathetic although less. John wanted the Gallery to be a lively place; he wanted to attract more people. He wanted to get rid of, for example, the old nineteenth-century benches that people used to sit on if they got tired, replace them with more contemporary furniture. He wanted to introduce musical programs, in particular jazz and that kind of thing, to attract wider audiences and to, if you like, jazz the place up a bit. That all sounds a bit superficial and in a way it was a bit superficial, I suppose, but it did nonetheless change the atmospherics around the Gallery and change the clientele and made artists feel more comfortable coming to the Gallery, I think. So – as I tried to indicate before, I’m not sure about any of this – I think the atmospherics created by Don Dunstan filtered through to John Baily, who was very receptive to being open and adventurous, and suited me.

It sort of made a good fit with what I wanted to do, anyway, because when I came from New Zealand I felt that Adelaide was surprisingly conservative. The commercial galleries shocked me, actually, for a city of a million or so people, to realise just how conservative it was, and with one or two notable exceptions like the Greenaway Art Gallery it still is very conservative.

Yes, I’d like to get onto that in just a moment. But, just to backtrack a moment, was Don a supporter in terms of attending exhibition openings or even doing the opening himself, was he around?

I don’t remember him being a very strong presence at openings but I guess he was and I just perhaps took him for granted. Certainly later on, in the late ’80s and early ’90s when I was head of the South Australian School of Art, I got him down to judge student competitions and open an exhibition or two and he was very willing to do it at that stage and did it nicely and well and with a sense of personal judgment coming forward from him, too: he wasn’t just a passive, you know, puppet politician at all; he actually took an interest in what was being exhibited and had his own strong opinions about the merits or demerits of what was shown, so he was very engaged and that was terrific.
Yes. I was actually going to ask you about the South Australian School of Art so hold that thought, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Go back to what you were saying, but I do want to ask you about the School of Art.

Sure. (break in recording) So basically what I did at the Gallery was concentrate on building the Australian collection with an emphasis on the 20th century and also the contemporary end and building the international collection, especially from the United States, not so much from the UK which had been a real focus for the Gallery for a long time. The international collection was very British-centric, if you want to put it that way.

But another thing which I initiated in 1974 was the so-called Link Exhibition Program –

Ah, good, I’m glad you’re going to talk about that.

– which was a series of small exhibitions of contemporary work from interstate, principally – not solely – which I saw as being information for artists in Adelaide which wasn’t being provided by the commercial sector. So John Baily was very supportive of that program. I ran it almost as a kind of – sounds a terrible word to use, I suppose – but a kind of ‘hobby’ on top of my other duties. He gave me modest funding, I think it was only about $500 per exhibition: it was enough in those days to cover freight of work from Sydney, for example. And we didn’t produce elaborate catalogues, just effectively lithograph sheets or, in some cases, just typed-up sheets pinned to a noticeboard called the Link Exhibition Noticeboard. And that was partly a deliberate strategy and partly an economic necessity. It was a deliberate strategy in the sense that we didn’t want to make too much of these shows, we didn’t want to feel in our great, glorious prestige as a state gallery we were giving much attention to particular contemporary artists (laughs) who might then fizzle. But it was information and it was a very lively program for a time.

How many artists at any one exhibition?

Usually one person. I think there might have been one or two two-person shows. I can’t think now. I think mainly one-person. But it was a lively exercise. It attracted
the attention of the Federal Police in one instance; attracted the attention of the local Vice Squad in another instance, a Richard Larter exhibition, someone complained about rude pictures.

Is that right?

Yes. They said they came down and took notes and went away again. The Federal Police were upset by actually a two-person exhibition by two local artists, Jim Cowley and – gosh, I’ve got a mental block.

Come back to it.

Yes. He’s faded from the scene. I can almost get it. [He] went down to work at Noarlunga, in the council. Blast! Anyway, it involved, in part, going onto buses dressed in suits with burning fuses sticking out of their coattails. You can imagine the riot it would cause today.

Oh! My goodness, yes.

And in one case following members of the public at random, I think with burning fuses as well – I can’t remember the detail of it offhand without looking up my notes – but it turned out that one of the persons followed worked for the federal Taxation Department, (laughs) so he complained to the Federal Police and the Federal Police came down and had a chat.

So this was a sort of living sculpture.

Yes, performance art – – –.

Performance art. This was à la Gilbert and George, was it?

That’s exactly right, yes. It was about the time when Gilbert and George came to Australia in New South Wales, actually. So I saw the police in both cases and I don’t think I bothered reporting it to John Baily. (laughter) So the less he knew the better, in some ways.

Those artists that you had in the Link Exhibitions, have some of them gone on to fame and fortune?
Yes, most of them have kept going quite effectively.

**And how long did that Link Exhibition period last?**

It lasted for about five years, from 1974–1979, although the peak period was really ’74, ’75 - that was the most intense period. The most famous or notorious exhibition was again an artist who came from Sydney but was at that stage living in Adelaide called Noel Sheridan, and the work was called ‘Everybody should get stones’, and this was an example of John Baily’s wonderful support for me: it comprised putting 25 tonnes of river stones in Gallery 1 in the Elder Wing on the floor and having typed up conceptual art propositions around the walls relating to stones. So you could relate from the conceptual ideas about stones to the actual objects, clamber over them. (laughs) But the courage of that really lay in the fact that we didn’t feel absolutely sure, although we did take engineering advice, that the gallery structure could actually support that weight. (laughs) But John Baily said, ‘Go ahead, anyway’, and we did.

**Very good.**

And it caused cartoons in the paper and questions in Parliament and all the rest of it, and I very strongly suspect that Don Dunstan would have been involved in the exchanges in Parliament but I don’t specifically remember it, but if one looked at the records we’d probably find something.

**Oh, that would be interesting. I’ve looked through some of the Hansard records, I haven’t actually noticed a question about that but I could have easily missed it.**

Yes.

**The Link exhibitors you said came from interstate.**

Mostly, yes.

**Did you also have local artists?**
Well, the ones I just mentions, as it happens, were all local. Bob Ramsay and – oh, Bob Ramsay, that’s the other name I was trying to remember – Bob Ramsay and Jim Cowley, the Taxation Department piece.

**The one with the fuses.**

The one with the fuses. (laughter) They were both local. And Noel Sheridan, as I say, although he came from Sydney, was at that stage living in Adelaide – he was Director of the Experimental Art Foundation, in fact.

**Oh, right. And the idea being to bring Australian artists from around the country to Adelaide.**

Yes, to jazz the scene up a bit.

**Yes – bring people into the Gallery, actually.**

Well, to bring people into the Gallery but also to let artists here know what was happening elsewhere, because Adelaide is still a long way from other places and we miss out on a lot of stuff.

**Indeed.**

And in fact the atmosphere created by the Link Exhibitions encouraged John Kaldor, the Sydney businessman, to bring one of his projects to Adelaide – I think it was the 1976 Festival, from memory – the two artists from United States, from New York: Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, she of the famous naked cello playing.

**Up suspended in the air.**

That’s right.

**Yes. Well, of course, John Kaldor I think is quite a good friend of Anthony Steele –**

That’s correct.

– **so that would have all tied in.**

That helped, yes.
On the subject of your duties, you said painting and sculpture.

Yes.

That had always been the case? Because sculpture doesn’t seem to me to be like painting, it’s a different expression of art altogether. Did a curator of sculpture and artefacts get introduced during the ’70s, during your time?

No. No, no. It was basically in those days we had a Curator of Paintings; we had a Curator of initially Decorative Arts, who was Dick Richards –

Yes.

– and that transmuted at some point, I don’t remember when, into Curator of Asian Art. Dick was certainly very interested in Asian art and collected, or at least a lot of Thai Sawankhalokware came into the Gallery during his time. I think there was a gift or major purchase from Thailand, I can’t remember. Dick will tell you if he hasn’t already.

He has, yes.

And so there was a Curator of Prints and Drawings, and that’s it. There was also an Education Officer and the Education Department varied in size and the Gallery Guides and so on and so forth, which were very useful. But basically the curating areas were divided according to medium rather than culture. Now, it’s much more divided according to culture, which is more sensible, more sophisticated.

Right. So Dick’s purchasing or acquisition of the Asian art came under the decorative or craft area –

Yes.

– and it was artefacts and that sort of thing. Yes, I understand.

Yes.

Well, that was – you having the sculpture portfolio, if you like, was good because that meant that the Link artists could be anything and everything in a variety of – – –.
Exactly, and [it] also meant that we could buy things like the Richard Long stone circle, which was a Ronald Alley suggestion, I think.

**And the wonderful birds.**

Birds?

** Aren’t they in this gallery?**

Oh, the circle of birds?

**Yes.**

Well, that was already – I can’t remember when we bought that, if that was in my time or just before. That’s by local artist Tony Bishop.

Yes, it’s terrific. You just mentioned the education person at the Gallery and that nicely fits in with a question I have about the School of Art. Now, I want to know what your involvement was but I’m also interested to know the history of the South Australian School of Art, which was on Stanley Street, was it, in North Adelaide?

That’s right, yes.

**And that was the major training ground for artists in this State, was it?**

That’s correct.

**Tell me, how long had it been going?**

Well, they actually flattered me by asking me to give the 150th anniversary address a few years ago.

**Oh, goodness – right back.**

So it can claim the longest continuous history of any art school in Australia, so it’s about 153 or 4 years old. I can give you a transcript of that – – –.

That would be interesting for the file; but I was interested to know not just when it started but also during Dunstan’s Era, if he supported it with any finances. How did it get its money, was it a State-run institution?
I think it was – under the Education Department, was it? I’m a bit hazy on the administrative details of that now. But it’s a very interesting question for reasons that I’ll come to in a second. It was at Stanley Street, that’s right; and then it moved to Underdale. Now, when did that happen? I think that happened in 1973, from memory. And it became part of what used to be called a college of advanced education, I think it became part of the Adelaide CAE and then later on changed its name, various amalgamations occurred and it became part of the SACAE, which had different campuses.

Now, it was widely considered that the move to Underdale was a terrible mistake in terms of location and the staff agreed to it, apparently – or the majority of the staff reluctantly agreed to it – because they got bigger and better facilities and also I think they went onto a different pay award and had more beneficial leave/pay package, whatever (laughs) set of considerations. And so they made a bit of a pact with the Devil. And I remember the Education Minister in the Dunstan Cabinet at that stage was a guy called Hugh Hudson, and I also remember – – –.

He was the local Member for Brighton, wasn’t he, or around there?

I can’t remember.

He was also instrumental in setting up the performing arts or the music schools and Brighton was one of the ones selected. I think Hugh Hudson was the local Member down there.

Right.

I might be wrong, but I don’t know.

Anyway, I remember vividly reading at about the time of my appointment – it might have even been a little article about my appointment, I’m not sure now, nice little piece by Peter Ward, the prominent journalist who used to write for The Australian newspaper, of course, feature writer – he said something about hope for the Art School because I was appointed, which was very nice of him, flattering, or something like that; but he also in that article or some other article about that time in
the early '70s made the very acid remark that Hugh Hudson sought to destroy the School of Art by moving it to Underdale.

It was moved in '73 –

I think so.

– but you were still working at the Gallery, of course, at that time.

Oh, yes. I didn’t join the Art School until the late '80s or mid-'80s –

Ah, right.

– because I went to Canberra in the meantime.

Yes, that move, it was probably pretty upsetting to most of the art world.

Well, it was a terrible move in many ways because the School kind of disappeared down at Underdale. When I became head – I was appointed at the end of '85, I think; notionally appointed at the end of '84 but I didn’t take up the appointment effectively till well into '85 because I went to America for a while. It effectively disappeared; it wasn’t even in the phone book. (laughs) Amazing! And it just sort of rumbled on down there doing its thing and they had a lot of staff who were tenured and there was very little movement at the station and it was all a bit – disappeared a bit.

The move and the comments that you’ve just quoted from Peter Ward, that Hugh Hudson was trying to strangle it or kill it off or something, would that have been in your opinion an individual minister’s, being the Education Minister, his responsibility or would that have come from Don, do you think?

I truly don’t know the answer to that, I simply don’t know. But my impression is that Don Dunstan didn’t really – I mean he wasn’t really – partly relates to your question about did he come to openings and so on – he was obviously extraordinarily sympathetic to the arts and that was wonderful, and he and John Baily as a member of the Labor Party and Dick Richards as a member of the Labor Party and of course Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister in 1972, it all created a kind of syndrome of support for the arts. And John Baily of course, as you know, was appointed the first
Chair of the Festival Centre once it was built and he also became the first Chair of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council –

Indeed, yes.

– which was wonderful for us when we had access to all this kind of, I don’t know, sense of power and privilege and funding.

Did his chairmanship of the – a question I have here, actually – – –.

But I didn’t fully answer your question, sorry, about Don Dunstan.

I wondered whether Don Dunstan had – whether Hugh Hudson’s suggestion that the School moved across to Underdale had been signed off or ticked off by Don Dunstan.

I don’t know. I suppose so, but – – –.

It does seem inconsistent, though, doesn’t it?

Well, my impression is – what I was trying to clumsily say is – that I felt that Don Dunstan was very much interested in the performing arts and wasn’t vitally interested in the visual arts. He was sympathetic and open to the visual arts but it wasn’t really his thing; much more performance oriented, performing arts oriented. And didn’t he sit on an elephant at the Zoo once and read poetry?

Well, he certainly read poetry; whether he sat on an elephant at the Zoo I’m not completely sure.

(laughs) I think there was something at the Zoo.

He did, he read Ogden Nash’s poem ‘The Carnival of the Animals’ at the Zoo. You mentioned the Australia Council. It’s a question I’ve got for you. John Baily was appointed as Chair, and of course that had to be approved by Don Dunstan because he was the minister responsible for John in his directorship of the Gallery, and I believe Don Dunstan, according to John, welcomed this approach that he would become the Chair of the Visual Arts Board.

Oh, yes.
What difference to the Gallery or to the art scene in South Australia did that appointment make, having somebody there, if you like, representing South Australia in a very strong position?

In terms of tangible difference probably not that much, but in terms of prestige and Adelaide’s cachet as a city for the arts it was probably about at its peak at that time. It wasn’t so strong before and has declined steadily since, (laughs) unfortunately. But it probably made a difference in terms of the way Adelaide was regarded and the way people from Adelaide were regarded, and would have made a difference in terms of being able to get major exhibitions to Adelaide.

Adding a bit of heavy shoulder to the mill.

Yes, exactly, yes, yes. And I can’t now remember, but it probably helped with a bit of purchase subsidy here and there, I’m not sure. But it’s more atmospherics, I think – a word I seem to be using a lot today – than anything really substantial.

Yes.

It all tended to end in the mid-’70s when John Baily left to become head of the Sydney College of the Arts.

Yes, who replaced him?

David Thomas replaced him, who had been Director at Newcastle. He had written a book on Rupert Bunny. And David was a very different sort of Director: he was much more bureaucratically-inclined; did a lot more of the administration, which was in some ways good because it released the curators to do curatorial work; in some ways it was a more dour sort of environment. But effective, it was productive.

I’m dotting around all over the place here.

That’s fine.

The acquisition of contemporary art and indeed the Link Exhibitions, is it true that they kind of evolved out of criticism that the Gallery was receiving from the Board of the SA School of Art that contemporary art was not being addressed well enough at the Gallery, is there any truth in that?
I don’t think there’s much truth in it. It was more the impetus coming from us at the Gallery. You can certainly go to any art school in the country and they will all complain about the lack of contemporary art in the local gallery, (laughs) that’s just a standard situation. I wasn’t conscious of any particular, effective push from the Art School Board or staff, for that matter. I did, as a prelude to starting the Link Exhibitions, though, form something called the Link Committee, which involved some members of the Art School staff. Who was that? I think it was Bill Clements and Clifford Frith were among those concerned, and maybe Tony Bishop, I can’t remember now. So we would meet regularly and discuss ideas for the Gallery and I used it shamelessly as a way of pressuring the Gallery to agreeing to the Link Exhibitions. But it wasn’t really from the School of Art as such, particularly.

Right.

And can I just say on the School of Art, because of the disaster at Underdale I saw my mission as School of Art head from the mid-‘80s on to move the School to the city, and when I finally got agreement from the University, which by then it was, of South Australia, University of South Australia to move the School – when did I get that? It was 1993, I think – I felt I could step down as Head of School. (laughs)

And it is now on the West Campus, is it?

Yes, City West, as they call it.

City West.

Yes, that’s correct.

And also joined up now with architecture, is it? Is it Art and Architecture?

Yes.

So it’s gone through another metamorphosis.

Architecture and Design, that’s right, yes. Yes, they’re very restless, these organisations: every set of administrators wants to make their own little stamp so they change the structure.
Yes. As the Curator of Paintings, did you have anything to do with Don Dunstan or Len Amadio or anybody in government in relation to loans of artworks going to public spaces or government offices?

Regrettably, yes. (laughs)

Tell me some stories.

Well, it was just a pain in the bottom, really, a nuisance having to operate a kind of furnishing service to Government House and some of the politicians’ offices and that kind of thing, and I was certainly not very keen on it because it was a waste of time and effort. (telephone rings, break in recording)

It was a waste of time and energy, as was the ability of the general public to bring their artworks in at any time for evaluation (laughs) from the staff. Took up an inordinate amount of non-productive time. Anyway, we did cut back on the furnishing, as I recall, and everyone was happier about it; and we stopped the evaluation process being so out of control as well. So that was all fine.

You mentioned Len Amadio –

Yes.

– and I must say he was also a very positive sort of person on the scene at that time. He or someone appointed me to be on the Arts Grants Advisory Committee of the South Australian Government in the early ’70s.

A very important body it was, too.

Was it? Yes.

Well, it was to do with the funding.

Yes, that’s right. We looked at all art forms, as I recall. I remember Prue Medlin, as she then was, was on the Committee; Len Amadio, of course, was I think the Chair of it. He was a delightful presence, very positive. There was a kind of positivity about Adelaide in those days and it did very much stem from Don Dunstan, I think, his liberal-minded attitude towards lifestyle, Aboriginal rights, a sense of positive
lifestyle attributes coupled with a genuine sense of social justice. It was really quite invigorating; and Len Amadio certainly fitted into that situation very well.

What else can I say about that?

You’ve talked about this sense of activity and things happening and Adelaide and South Australia being on the sort of – caught up in that wave that was to do with Gough Whitlam and also Don Dunstan, of course.

Yes.

Was it sort of exciting? I mean did you get a daily sense that you were being injected with energy and that things were happening?

I suppose so, yes. I mean some of it didn’t seem all that surprising to me in terms of social justice coming from Dunstan and Whitlam, because as I indicated before I came from New Zealand where there was quite a strong sense of social democracy and progressive sort of policies on race and all that kind of thing already well and truly in place. But yes, it was a sense of energy.

I remember actually that Don Dunstan, as you know, was talked about as a possible Prime Minister for a time there in the early–mid ’70s. So there was a sense that we were dealing with the best of the best, really, in terms of the political scene in those days, and it was exciting. And of course it’s kind of hard to answer the question with any great objectivity because you’ve got to remember in those days I was also very young, (laughs) still in my twenties, so how much is youthful vigour or stupidity and how much was to do with the political scene is rather hard to tell.

Yes.

But I think it was, I think it’s fair to say there was a sense of energy.

Well, I lived outside the State and certainly South Australia got into the news a lot.

Yes.

And not just the pink shorts, it was all kinds of other things. It was a sense of freedom, the liberalisation of various quite repressive laws, and a sense that Don Dunstan was a man that made things happen.
Yes, and he had courage, too. He even took on the Police Commissioner, didn’t he, that awful – was his name Salisbury or something? – who was acting outrageously and not being responsible to Parliament but to some sort of notion of higher intelligence, the intelligence community.

**Yes. Don Dunstan was very brave on things like that.**

He was.

**And how much in the way of personal contact did you have with him?**

Not a lot. I probably had more when I was Head of School, inviting him down to open the odd exhibition and that kind of thing. As I say, he didn’t give a sense of hands-on interest in the visual arts, really. But it was more a sense of being supportive of the arts in general, sort of an umbrella situation under which a thousand flowers could bloom, if you like.

**That’s right, yes. And that’s why that response that you made about Hugh Hudson shooting off the School to Underdale –**

Yes.

– **is so inconsistent with that notion, isn’t it?**

That’s right. Yes, it’s interesting, it really is. And it’s quite interesting you raise that because I’d forgotten about Hugh Hudson until we came to talk now, completely forgotten about him. But I vividly remember that comment by Peter Ward because it was so stinging.

**Indeed. The scene during the ’70s, talk about that a bit – and I’m talking about the commercial galleries, the entrepreneurs: Kym Bonython, for example, is one name that stands out. I think he was here most of the Dunstan Decade; I know he went to Sydney, but — —. Were they important in the art scene here, those local entrepreneurs and commercial gallery owners and dealers?**

Well, they were pretty, by and large, not very impressive, I have to say, to be honest. Kym Bonython was certainly an exception to that, he was certainly important, and he had major shows by major artists, very much in the kind of mainstream, Modernist
tradition. He certainly supported the Antipodean generation and people like Syd Ball, and some local artists as well he would support like Robert Boynes. But he was a bit of an exception and, as you say, he went to Sydney at some stage in the ’70s, I think, and made that his focus for a while before he came back.

There were some other attempts at things which had real significance. The Llewellyn Galleries in Swift Street, Dulwich – I think it was number 16 or number 22 Swift Street, I don’t remember exactly – run by Richard, the late Richard and his then wife Jill Llewellyn, now better known as the writer Kate Llewellyn –

Oh!

– who’s come back to live in Adelaide, by the way – that certainly was a very lively and effective supporter of local artists, including people like Jim Cowley, who I mentioned before, and people like – I can’t think; Ann Newmarch and Barry Goddard. Gosh, I can’t think of the names offhand. Lots of people.

That’s all right. There’s a couple of other questions I’d like to ask you. One of the things that Don Dunstan was very keen on in his wider arts vision was promoting the arts in regional South Australia and, as you know, he developed those art centres in the big rural regions – Whyalla, Port Lincoln, Renmark, Port Pirie, Mount Gambier. Did the Art Gallery get involved in taking visiting exhibitions to those centres? I believe they all had exhibition spaces.

Yes. It’s an interesting question. The Dunstan Government was very interested in those areas, wasn’t it?

And funded them, too.

Yes. Monarto was one of the ideas that didn’t quite come off, unfortunately, wasn’t it?

I think that was a satellite town more than an art centre.

Satellite town, that’s exactly right. But, to answer your question, yes, the Gallery was involved in generating travelling exhibitions to go to regional centres; in fact, they had a very active program under the Education Officer, Don Hein. They actually had a truck specially fitted-out to take travelling exhibitions to regional
centres and they would go out on the road for long periods of time, have exhibitions, an education officer would go with the exhibition and give talks to local people and so on and so forth. That was a very active program. I don’t know what happened to it, actually.

Yes, well, those centres certainly still exist –

Yes.

– and I don’t know whether the Gallery still supports it through touring exhibitions.

Not sure. Not sure. I haven’t concerned myself with that one.

Did you get involved in that, were you involved in putting collections together to take on the road?

Mainly trying to prevent them take the very valuable works away from the Gallery! (laughs)

Yes.

So there was always that little bit of tension between the education people and the curatorial staff, in a friendly way, just negotiating what could go on the road and what couldn’t.

Well, those exhibitions with insurance and all the transport costs and extra staff and so on, I wonder if they were funded – with Don Dunstan’s keenness to promote the regions of South Australia, I wonder whether he gave that individual funding.

I’m almost certain that the South Australian Government did give special funding for it but again I can’t be absolutely crystal clear on that, but I strongly suspect they did, very strongly suspect they did.

Yes. It would be consistent.

It would be absolutely consistent and they were very keen on it, and it was a very active program for quite a number of years.

Through your tenure at the Gallery?
Yes – well, through a lot of it, yes. It probably started up, I can’t remember, ’73, ’74, something like that.

Yes. I think when I was interviewing Len he said that the building or refurbishment – one or two refurbished; the others were built from scratch – was a program that lasted about eight years, I think, and there were about six centres altogether –

Right.

– six regional art centres, and they involved stage and performing art and visual art spaces.

Yes, but it didn’t have much to do with the refurbishment of the Gallery itself.

No, no, not the Gallery here; I’m talking about some halls in regional centres were refurbished.

Sure, okay.

But that regional building program, development program, in the centres like Port Augusta and so on took about eight years, I think.

Yes. Well, that was an example of social – sense of democracy and equity in action, which was really good.

In 1976 I think the Art Gallery went out of the direct responsibility of the Premier and went into a Department of the Arts which was headed up by Len Amadio.

Yes.

Did that make a difference, do you recall? Did that make a difference to the way the Gallery operated?

I didn’t notice it at my level in the Gallery. Probably made it a bit more bureaucratic in terms of an extra step in the chain of command, as it were. But I didn’t notice any difference.

Interesting you should mention bureaucracy, because I think ’76, wasn’t it, that was the year that John Baily left?

Pretty sure it was, yes.
Yes.

Pretty sure it was.

I wonder if, because he wasn’t a bureaucratic man, he saw the writing on the wall?

Yes, it’s possible.

That’s conjecture, of course.

Yes, well, on my part, too; but it’s entirely consistent. And, as I say, David Thomas, who came in for a number of years, was much more bureaucratically-inclined – and good at administration, actually, very hardworking, as was his deputy, Ron Appleyard, who was also of course John Baily’s deputy. And David was Director there until about, I suppose, about ’83 or ’84, was he?

I don’t know, I don’t know.

Because Ron Radford followed me as Curator of Paintings in 1980. (telephone commences to ring). He followed me in 1980 and the staff became dissatisfied with David Thomas for whatever reason and he ceased to be Director in about 1984, I think. So then Daniel Thomas became Director for about five or six years I think, followed by Ron.

Yes. And he lasted quite a long time.

He lasted a long time, yes.

Yes. [In] 1979, under David Thomas, the Art Gallery underwent a major refurbishment to the tune of, I believe, $4 million, which was quite a lot of money in those days. Could you talk about that? And Don Dunstan was coming to the end of his life as Premier but I wonder what influences he would have had on the money being allocated, or was that good, strong persuasion (telephone stops ringing) from David Thomas? I mean do you know where that came from – because you, of course, were still there at the time.

Yes, there was a refurbishment in terms of the floors, the lighting and better library, because the library beforehand was a disgrace, in fact: just a set of compactus shelving. And what else happened? Can’t remember offhand.
So it wasn’t major building works, then; it was interior refurbishment of the nature you’ve just described.

Yes, that’s correct. They didn’t really get the serious extensions till much later. So the question was – sorry, I was distracted by the phone.

I wondered if the refurbishment in 1979 had come from Don or from good, clever dealing through the new Director.

I think the latter. I’m pretty sure the latter. Because Don Dunstan was fading out by that stage, anyway, wasn’t he –

He was, yes.

– and they had that scurrilous book by those journalists. I don’t know when that came out, but –

Around that time, I believe.

– it must have been around about that time.

It’s interesting, so that whole new part of the Gallery, including the café and all the rest of it, was way later than that.

Yes, that must have been well into the period when Daniel Thomas became Director; sorry, Daniel Thomas became Director after David Thomas.

You said David Thomas – – –.

Sorry. Yes, it’s confusing. David Thomas was Director from around 1976–1983 or something like that. Then there was Daniel Thomas. Then there was Daniel Thomas for quite a few years – five, six, seven years – then Ron Radford. The two Thomases confused people.

I bet they did. I have read a document given to me by Len Amadio from 1971 which was a Don Dunstan vision of developing tourism in South Australia – a fascinating document it is, too – and one of the things – I mean he talks a lot about opening restaurants and developing areas for particular tourist reasons, and that’s all over the State, not just in Adelaide; and one of the things right in 1971 he said that the Gallery needed a really good restaurant. And I thought that was interesting –
Yes.

– that it took another, what, 15 years or something –

Yes.

– from 1971 for it to be manifest.

That’s right, that’s right. They had a tiny one for a while, which was an attempt. When did that start? That probably started in the early ’80s or something like that.

I’ll take that phone off the hook, actually.

Okay. (break in recording) One thing I did want to get your comments on is the famous Hajek sculpture.

Oh, yes.

Talk about that for a minute, will you?

Sure. Well, that was a real focus point of dissension.

Give us a little bit of background, just for the tape, first.

Well, the Hajek sculpture is basically the way the Plaza of the Festival Centre was developed, with sculptural elements and sculptural treatment of airconditioning vents and so on and so forth, including strong colour elements and the paving and the concreting of the Plaza of the Festival Centre. It was developed by the German public artist [Otto] Hajek in response to an approach, I think, or contact between him and John Baily in the mid-’70s, and John Baily at that stage was of course the Chair of the Festival Centre Trust. I remember John Baily showing me a model of the complex out in the Conservation Department of the Art Gallery of South Australia pulling a sheet off this three-dimensional model on a tabletop. My intuitive reaction was to blanch a bit and pull a face, at which point John Baily caught my expression and quickly pulled the sheet back over it again. (laughs)

He supported it pretty strongly, didn’t he?

He felt he had to. But it wasn’t a great success and it was certainly objected to by a lot of the local artists, headed up by people like Noel Sheridan, who we mentioned
before, who was then Director of the Experimental Art Foundation. There were big
protests on the Plaza. It was seen to be rather unfriendly, a common comment was it
looked like a series of tank traps by this German sculptor, and they were upset that it
wasn’t given to an Australian artist, such a major commission. I think, in fairness,
that the project didn’t receive quite the level of funding that Hajek had hoped for so
it was perhaps a little compromised, as is often the way with public sculpture, but
yes, it wasn’t seen as a great success and certainly was a rallying-point for local
artists for a time.

I can imagine. It’s a very, very difficult and unsympathetic site.

It's a difficult site and it was seen to be made even worse by this sculpture, really,
because it basically comprises, as you know, big areas of paving without shade.

(laughs)

Yes.

And the colours weren’t seen to be very attractive, and on and on. There’s a school
of thought – I know Ron Radford has said this in my hearing, to me in fact – that it
almost has a period piece validity now, which is a bit of sophistry I think. (laughter)

Let’s talk a little bit more about South Australia and Don Dunstan and how you
saw him as a citizen of this State, of this city. I want to just put this in: that, as an
outsider, Adelaide is a small community. There’s a mix of people from the
professions, from the arts, from government, and it was even smaller in the days of
the Dunstan Era. That smallness, that intermix between different people coming
from various areas, it did spawn ideas, I believe; people would be talking in pubs
and somebody would overhear that happened to be in government and mention it
to Don, who was receptive; and then he would say, ‘That’s a good idea’, and sort of
act on it. And I believe that’s how the Craft Authority was sort of born, through a
conversation that Dick Richards was having in a pub.

Yes, it’s plausible.

I wondered if anything serendipitous like that ever happened to you, and can you
sort of expand on that whole notion of the smallness of Adelaide and Don
Dunstan’s Era?
Yes. Well, nothing equivalent happened to me but I have heard that story about pub conversations generating the Craft Authority and the Jam Factory. Dunstan was very keen on the idea of training local craftspeople, people working locally, to develop designs which could be mass-produced cheaply – a bit like Ikea, I suppose. Now, that didn’t really happen, but nonetheless the Jam Factory has kept going, willy-nilly, and has been quite significant in terms of the national development of craft in Australia.

As far as Adelaide’s smallness is concerned, certainly it is a real plus and a minus. People do tend to talk to each other reasonably well in Adelaide, by and large, with some exceptions. Different organisations in the visual arts would have overlapping memberships: for example, the Experimental Art Foundation and the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia. Both survived as publicly-funded spaces.

What was that second one?

The Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, CACSA – which is rather an unfortunate acronym – – –. They’ve both survived as publicly-funded spaces in spite of periodic moves by administrators to amalgamate them.

Funding for the Experimental Art Foundation started in 1974, I think, and that was a direct result of John Baily being initially unsympathetic but being turned around by pressure by various people, including myself, to the view that it was a good thing. He wasn’t persuaded initially that it was a good thing because he was suspicious of the person whose principal idea it was to start it, and that was a guy called Donald Brook, a philosopher – good friend of mine.

But I think the bad side of Adelaide can be a little petty and I feel that Don Dunstan was pulled down a bit by a certain level of pettiness. It may have been partly his own fault, but really, as I vaguely remember that book by the journalists who wrote – what was it called?

Was it Improper conduct – – –?

Grossly improper or something like that.
Yes.

Really, when you read it, the so-called ‘improper conduct’ was comparatively minor compared to the absolute criminality of the New South Wales Government (laughs) and places like that. So it was rather unfortunate.

And I also remember something which you’ve probably gone into, but Max Harris used to write a column for the *Sunday Mail* during the Dunstan Era – have you looked at that at all?

I’m aware of it. According to Don Dunstan’s own book, *Felicia*, he became more conservative than the Adelaide Club.

Yes. (laughs) Well, he certainly did become very conservative and I remember he was reduced to writing about the size of cakes of soap in Qantas first-class flights (laughs) or something ridiculous. But he relentlessly attacked Don Dunstan, made fun of him. He would mention him and follow his mentioning his name by putting ‘glitter, glitter’ – the words ‘glitter, glitter’ in brackets after his name every time and so on and so forth.

Is that right?

So a kind of ridicule occurred, which must have been — —.

And that was during Dunstan’s Premiership still, while he was — —?

Yes, yes. So it must have been quite corrosive in a way because it was carried on for a good while. I remember Dick Richards saying to me that Max Harris could bring down the Government, which might have been an exaggerated statement, but he was obviously worried about it. So it’s all a bit unfortunate, really, because Dunstan might have been a little bit careless with whom he promoted to positions and so on and so forth; he was overall, I think, a force for the good, hugely, and it’s very, very unfortunate to have him pulled down.

Did you get a sense that the likes of Max Harris and others, I believe, who were making those corrosive statements, did you get the feeling that it played a part in Dunstan’s ultimate demise and falling out of favour with the Establishment here and what happened immediately following?
Yes.

**Can you expand on that a little?**

Well, probably not very much. Others would know more. But I would say it did have an effect. And he didn’t just fall out with the Establishment – I don’t know that he was ever that much *in* with the Establishment, really. I mean there’s all sorts of racist comments about his background, and the fact that he was considered to be gay without being openly gay and all this sort of stuff probably was anathema to a lot of (laughs) more conservative elements in Adelaide. And that really came to a focused point with the business with the Police Commissioner –

**Yes, Salisbury.**

– with Salisbury refusing to open files to the Government or whatever it was, I can’t remember. So I guess in some ways the odds were stacked a bit against Dunstan from the outset but, through various unfortunate factors, just became worse.

**Tell me about the times that you actually met him. What circumstances were they?**

Oh, at openings, public functions, when he came down to open exhibitions at the School of Art and things like that, which happened two or three times perhaps. He always struck me as being rather conscious of his own image. Bit hard to really have a relaxed exchange with – maybe it was just me being intimidated or shy or whatever, I don’t know – but didn’t feel 100 per cent comfortable in his company even though I was very much a supporter of him.

**A reserved man.**

Yes. I felt he was holding a lot in. He was very conscious of a certain public – – –.

**And that was quite a long time after his Premiership. He’d had his breakdown and he’d gone away and he’d returned –**

Yes.

– but, you’re talking about the School of Art in the ’80s, aren’t you?
Yes, I was, when I mentioned the School of Art, yes.

And was that before or after he’d been to Victoria to do that stint in tourism there?

Can’t remember. (laughs) Probably after.

He got rather short shrift from the political scene after his ‘demise’, if you like, didn’t he? He didn’t really get awarded any interesting chairmanships – except I think the Craft Authority, I think he became [Chair of that].

Yes. It is almost like he was wasted is my impression, I don’t know in detail what he was appointed to or not, but I got the impression that he was rather wasted in more ways than one, which is a real pity. My gut reaction as a kind of quasi-observer, quasi-outsider, was that taking the job in Victoria wasn’t a great idea. It seemed almost demeaning after being Premier and so prominent to take a comparatively minor job running tourism for another State, didn’t seem appropriate at all to me.

Do you think it might be because that was the only job he could get?

Well, one has to assume that might be the case. I guess the offers weren’t coming thick and fast.

Yes, one could make that assumption.

Yes.

Tragically sad.

Yes. Pity. Real pity. A pity someone with more vision couldn’t have taken him under their wing and used his talents more productively.

Yes, there was definitely, from my reading of it all these years later, an arm’s length sort of approach after he left the Premiership.

Yes. Well, it’s certainly a real fall from grace, isn’t it, because, as I said, around 1973/74 people were talking about him as a possible future Prime Minister. They saw him as being as good at Whitlam, probably more balanced or – I don’t know really what comparison they’d make, but certainly up there with Whitlam as a powerful, principal Labor leader.
And an innovative man, a renaissance man.

Yes. Yes, that’s right, all that.

Yes. And I think South Australia has benefited enormously, would you not agree, from his decade.

Oh, absolutely. I think so, absolutely. Well, the Festival Centre itself, although not necessarily the greatest architecture in the world, started off a spate of festival centre building in Australia and it was really very good, very effective. Adelaide had a well-deserved reputation – I don’t even know if it’s got a reputation for it, but it was certainly a fact that a lot of things started in Adelaide that were taken up interstate. The Link Exhibitions became something like the Project Exhibitions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Survey Exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria, for example. The craft emphasis was taken up by other States more and more. The women’s art movement I think had a very early genesis in South Australia, it might have been the first centre for the women’s art movement – I’m not 100 per cent certain now; certainly very early. Artworkers’ Union I think had a strong base in South Australia. The Festival itself, of course, is a major thing for Australia; other States have become steadily more interested in festivals and put more and more money into them: Victoria and New South Wales especially noticeable; Perth; even New Zealand – Wellington, Auckland. So yes, South Australia is very good for innovating things and then, because it’s small and not very well-funded, not so rich as other States, it tends to have things taken up by the richer people, (laughs) more populous centres.

Yes, indeed. Well, it’s been very enjoyable talking to you. Do you have anything else in terms of personal observation or funny stories or anecdotes that you’d like to share with the future generations that will be listening to this?

(laughs) Can’t think of anything directly to do with Don Dunstan. The only funny thing I can think of – sort of tangential, really – is to do with the Charlotte Moorman performance at the Art Gallery of South Australia. I had the job of ushering her from her hotel with her husband to the Gallery to perform, and she was waiting in the
wings in the Boardroom of the Art Gallery of South Australia, standing by me, about to go on stage in the adjacent gallery, and she promptly vomited all over my shoes, she was so nervous. Which was a real shock. (laughs) But I don’t think that’s got much to do with Don Dunstan – except insofar as the fact that you can have vomiting, New York avant-garde artists in the Gallery somehow was made possible by Don Dunstan.

Yes, absolutely. Did you attend any of his famous lunches at his house in Norwood.

No. I was never a member of the inner circle.

Right – well, it was a fairly small circle, I understand. Even I don’t think John Baily knew him on that personal a level.

No, I don’t think he did.

But it was exciting, yes, you’re right. To finish on that note about her vomiting on your shoes, it probably couldn’t happen nowadays.

No.

Do you think?

No; everything is much more managed, isn’t it? It’s very interesting, actually, being in art museums as I was as a curator from 1969–1985, because during that period it really moved from a period of inspired amateurism to a much more professional and buttoned-down operation. But also museums have to raise much more of their own money these days, which I think is wrong in terms of the culture in our society. I think we should use the taxation system to fund culture, and Don Dunstan certainly believed that and I think he was absolutely right.

Yes. I think his notions of art being an integral part of what makes human society good and – – –.

Yes, that’s right. Not just something for a plaything for people with spare cash.

Was there a Friends of the Gallery back in those days or was that subsequent to the ’70s?
No, there was a Friends organisation. I don’t know when it started, it might have been a John Baily initiative. I’m not sure. But there certainly was a Friends organisation which was quite active during that time.

**Well, that’s interesting, and it’s still going strong.**

Yes.

**And the Gallery’s going from strength to strength.**

It’s going very well. They’ve got a very impressive crew of young curators there, which is very pleasing to see.

**And just one thing before we finish: you mentioned getting rid of the onerous task of doing valuations and looking at people’s paintings. Artlab was developed in that time, was it, to take over that job?**

I don’t know. It was about conservation rather than evaluation… I think Artlab really came into being after my time.

**Oh, fair enough. Well, if you’ve got nothing more to add, Ian?** Okay, well, thank you very much indeed.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW