OPTION 2

Adaptive Action in the Face of Fire: Relocating the Bundanon Collection

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Art relocation cards in the Bundanon Homestead, January 2020. Photo Bundanon

IAS truck transporting the Bundanon Collection through the burnt-out bush to safety during the January 2020 fires. Photo ABC News Brendan Esposito

The fire season began early in 2019. By September fires were burning in many parts of Australia, particularly on the south coast of NSW where the Bundanon properties are located.

Over the next two months the fires intensified to a point where the Bundanon properties were threatened with certain damage and possible destruction. Existing emergency art relocation plans were implemented, however, as Bundanon became ringed by fire, it was clear that the enormity of the impending disaster required rapid adaption and action in order to save the unique and valuable Collection.

Bundanon is located on the NSW South Coast, 22 kms inland from Nowra on the northern banks of the Shoalhaven River. In 1993, Australian artist Arthur Boyd and his wife Yvonne, gave Bundanon as a gift to the people of Australia, which was accepted by former Prime Minister Paul Keating on behalf of the Australian Government. The gift included four properties totalling 1,100 hectares of land, heritage buildings, farm buildings and machinery, and an extensive collection of artworks by Arthur Boyd, his family and peers. The collection now also includes contemporary work by artists who have taken part in Bundanon's residency program.

In addition to the art collection the gift also included a rugs and furniture collection, some of which date back to the 17th century; two book libraries; an archive of the Boyd family papers – including diaries from the early 1840s and photographs of family and friends; an image library of Arthur Boyd's work and records of significant events in Arthur's career.

At the end of 2019, Bundanon had relocated staff from the Riversdale property to the Bundanon property, and all the artworks that had been on display. This had been done in preparation for the construction of a new Art Museum and Creative Learning Centre which was planned to commence in early 2020.

The Currowan bushfire started by lightning strike on 26 November 2019 in remote bushland on the NSW South Coast and moved relentlessly in a northerly direction. It joined up with two other major fire fronts and crossed the Shoalhaven River in early January 2020, raising the threat to the Bundanon properties.

Working with the Rural Fire Service (RFS), our Government Department, our Board and specialist art transport company International Art Services (IAS), plans were followed and activated to keep the Collection safe. Bundanon's Emergency Art Relocation Action Plan (EARA), a part of the Disaster Management Plan, is a guide to be followed in the event of a disaster, especially bushfire. The aim of the plan is to move artworks to the best area of protection based on available time and resources.

On Christmas Eve there were only four staff members on site at Bundanon. It was decided to activate the first stage of the

left:
Working with IAS on site at Bundanon to relocate artworks from the Collection to safety, January 2020. Photo ABC News Brendan Esposito

opposite:
Packing objects for relocation, January 2020. Merric Boyd, *Bust of Doris Boyd*, original sculpture 1914–15, bronze cast 1982. Bundanon Collection. Photo Bundanon

EARA Plan – which was to take works off the walls that were on display in the heritage-listed sandstone Homestead and Arthur Boyd's studio. Some works were relocated to the purpose-built collection store, and others were laid on the ground floor of the Homestead and covered with fire blankets.

Bundanon, which is usually open to the public every Sunday, plus Saturdays in January, was closed. On Sunday 29 December, some staff (including myself as Collections Manager) were allowed in with special permission from the RFS. Each artwork on display at Bundanon has an art relocation card adhered to the wall behind it which has the details of the artwork plus information on where to take the work. This means that any member of staff, or a volunteer, can assist with art relocation. We moved everything we possibly could into the collection store, which is fire rated up to two hours. This included additional artworks from the Homestead and other significant items from the studio.

Unnecessary items and outdoor furniture were all moved away from the buildings. There was a strong sense that we had done everything we could to protect Bundanon. It was now up to the prevailing conditions, the wind direction and the speed of the fires. All we could do was walk away, wait and see.

Towards the end of 2019, as the fire season approached, we modified the EARA Plan to include a priority list of artworks that we would take off site if the situation called for it. We soon realised we needed to rethink this idea and consider the relocation of the entire Collection. There were many conversations and phone calls; plans were discussed, and decisions were made.

A small team of us were onsite at 7am on Friday 3 January and our art removalists, IAS, were due in at 10am. This meant we had just three hours to be as ready as we could possibly be – and it was set to be another extremely hot and dry day.

We worked very closely with Kingsley Mundey, CEO, and Paul Cartwright, NSW State Manager of IAS, both of whom did everything they could to help us. IAS had shut down for the Christmas/New Year break, and all their staff were on leave. However, they called staff back in and arranged for trucks to come to Bundanon with the fires blazing all around. Their staff were so willing to help, they were amazing.

Working with the priority list of works, we removed the most valuable and significant

artworks from the storage racks ready to go into the trucks first. It was then a matter of prioritising works by size and location in the collection store. Taking all the large works out first freed up space to get medium and smaller sized works out and ready. Each work was checked against a list and marked as relocated off-site. IAS later used these lists to allocate each work a specific location within their storage facilities.

After five or six hours of solid work (and many cups of coffee) we had to leave. The wind was picking up and the emergency services wanted us out of there. Again, it felt strange to leave, hoping that all we had done so far was enough and that everything would be ok.

At home, we all had our own emergency situations to deal with. Many of us had to evacuate our homes more than once, my family did three times. Our evacuation boxes were packed with important papers and irreplaceable photographs; supplies for pets and carry boxes were ready and we lived out of our overnight bags, so we were ready to go at a moment's notice. There were many conversations, considering different scenarios and how we would respond in each. Needless to say, it was a very worrying and demanding few weeks, at work and at home.

We came back onsite to Bundanon four more times. On two of those occasions an IAS packer with specialist ceramics experience carefully wrapped, labelled and pack the extensive ceramics collection for safe transportation. At some stage, amidst the negotiations, it was decided that we would in fact relocate all the collection off site to safe climate-controlled storage with IAS at their Mascot premises. The new infrastructure, planned over many years, was to be built in the coming 18 months including a subterranean art museum and collection store. It would be a disaster to lose any of the collection to fire at this stage, so it made sense to move it to safety until these new buildings were ready.

On day two of relocating the rest of the collection offsite, ABC TV were with us doing a story and filming us as we worked. It was fabulous to have this media coverage, but it did add another layer of stress as we were documented carrying out procedures that we had planned but had never needed to activate.

Heavy rain in early February finally extinguished the Currowan fire. It had raged for 74 days and burnt almost 500,000 hectares of land.

Bundanon decided to re-open to the public as soon as possible and begin preparing for the coming year of school visits and mid-week tours. As most of the collection was off-site, we looked to using reproductions of significant works to hang in the Homestead and studio along with some minor works and objects we had held back, so we could continue to tell the story of Arthur Boyd and Bundanon. High resolution digital prints were reproduced on canvas and stretched onto timber frames at the same size as the originals. Accurate in colour and dimensions, the only element missing is the wonderful texture and tactile nature of Boyd's paintings.

Bundanon is a national collecting institution and as such the Federal Government generously funded the purchase and installation of an ember suppression system to protect the property from future bushfire threat. It includes automatic ground and roof sprinklers, and hose reels backed up by underground water tanks and a pump system.

We opened for one Sunday then had to shut our doors again as the heavy rain, which put out the fire, closed and damaged the dirt access road. We opened again towards the end of February, only to close three weeks later as a virus called COVID19 appeared on the horizon … but that is a whole other story.

Jennifer Thompson is Collections Manager at Bundanon

The Bundanon Collection Policy, including the Disaster Management Plan and the Emergency Art Relocation Action Plan can be accessed on our website: **bundanon.com.au**