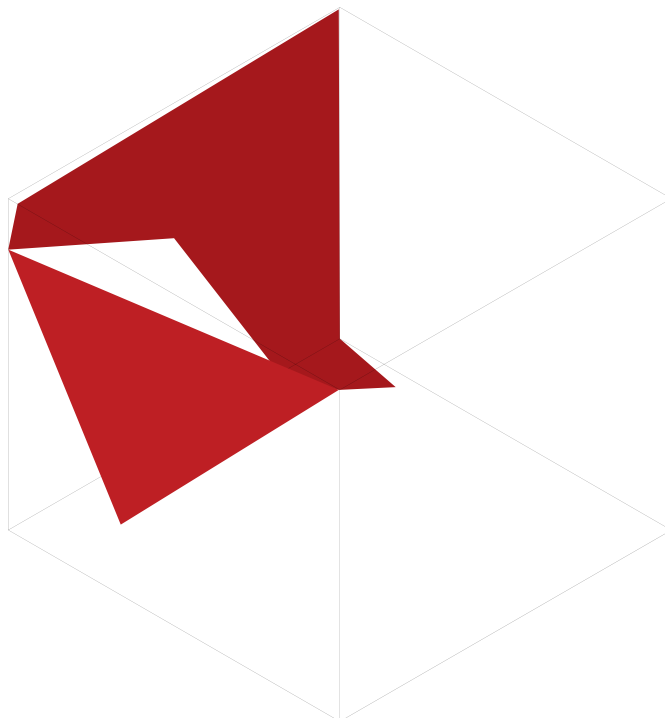


# Studies in Material Thinking



---

Faculty of Design and  
Creative Technologies  
Auckland University of Technology  
Auckland 1142, New Zealand

---

Eml [info@materialthinking.org](mailto:info@materialthinking.org)  
Web [www.materialthinking.org](http://www.materialthinking.org)

---

## Volume 12 Material Thinking of Display

---

### The Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art

---

**Erica Green**

---

*Abstract: Bespoke, contextual and purpose-based, the University of South Australia's Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art is an architecturally distinguished state-of-the-art university art gallery. Its generous scale and thoughtful proportions allow for truly ambitious projects to be presented with visual power, engaging and exciting audiences, and inspiring artists and curators alike. Conceived to enhance rather than hinder the presentation of art, the Samstag has the size and flexibility to respond to the unpredictable imaginations of artists, as well as the physical and technical standards to satisfy the increasingly strict requirements of lenders. This paper considers the close interrelation between the Samstag Museum's architecture and its artistic programs, and also, importantly, the Museum's unique place within Adelaide's visual arts scene, which informs what it is that Samstag does, and why, and for whom. It also provides some background to the creation of the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art as a prestige cultural facility of the University of South Australia.*

*Keywords: Erica Green, Samstag, Samstag Museum, Samstag Museum of Art, Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, John Wardle Architects, Daniel Crooks, Roy Ananda, White Rabbit Gallery, Lynette Wallworth, Colliding Worlds, Warwick Thornton, museum architecture*

---

**STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING**

[www.materialthinking.org](http://www.materialthinking.org)

ISSN: 1177-6234

Auckland University of Technology

First published in April 2007, Auckland, New Zealand.

Copyright © Studies in Material Thinking and the author.

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the applicable copyright legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher or author. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact the Editor at <[materialthinking@aut.ac.nz](mailto:materialthinking@aut.ac.nz)>

**STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING** is a peer-reviewed research journal supported by an international Editorial Advisory Group. The journal is listed in the Australian ERA 2012 Journal List (Excellence in Research for Australia). It is registered in the current Danish Government Research Database and in the current Norwegian register of approved scientific journals, series and publishers.

---

**Author**

**Erica Green /**  
Director, Anne & Gordon  
Samstag Museum of Art /  
University of South Australia /  
Erica.Green@unisa.edu.au

---

**Introduction**

Located prominently in the University of South Australia's head office Hawke Building (at the University's city west campus on Adelaide's North Terrace cultural boulevard), the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art has established itself as one of Australia's leading university art museums since opening in 2007, while setting a design benchmark for a building of its particular purpose and scale. It is a specialised building that is not simply pragmatically functional, but in fact architecturally distinguished—a state-of-the-art university art gallery, whose generous scale and thoughtful proportions allow for truly ambitious projects of all kinds of art and multi-media, presented with the visual power that engages and excites modern audiences, and inspires the vision of artists!

The principal architects of the Samstag Museum—the award-winning Melbourne-based architecture firm John Wardle Architects—must be acknowledged not only for their imaginative talents and professional skills, but for their patient consideration of endless requests for revisions to the gallery plans, as architects and client worked together to grapple with the special challenge that art museum design presents. For art museum design is bespoke, contextual and purpose-based. The architects' willingness to work closely with the Museum, all the while respecting its primary function as a space for the display of works of art, has proven to be the crux of the Museum's architectural success.



Figure 1. Fiona Hall, *Different Forms of Intelligence*, 2007, commissioned for the Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia entrance off North Terrace, Adelaide. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

**Samstag Museum:  
Some Background**

This paper considers the close interrelation between the Samstag Museum's architecture and its artistic programs, and also, importantly, the Museum's unique place within Adelaide's visual arts scene, which informs what it is that Samstag does, and why, and for whom. It also provides some background to the creation of the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art as a prestige cultural facility of the University of South Australia.

Essentially, the Samstag Museum's mission is to make a meaningful cultural and educational contribution within the University, broadly, through its visual arts programs. The Museum has a role, as well, to connect with a wide community of South Australians, and engage them in the life of the University. The Museum's changing program of high quality exhibitions emphasizes contemporary art and design, but also includes historical exhibitions and projects which are relevant to the cultural life of South Australia. Samstag also features projects aligned to the research objectives of the University, and pursues creative connections with relevant networks, artists and individuals who may further the Museum's cultural objectives.

The Samstag Museum of Art is entirely independent from UniSA's School of Art, Architecture and Design. The School was not involved in the Museum's creation, and as a result the Museum is not principally a teaching resource for the school. However Samstag's program and activities are calculated to be highly relevant to students of art, architecture and design from across Adelaide, who are seen as a key constituency.

The University has a growing collection of important contemporary art, managed by the Samstag Museum and displayed around different campuses. The Museum additionally has the unusual role of administering the Samstag Scholarships program, established in 1992 through the bequest of American artist, Gordon Samstag. However these are supplementary things: the Museum's core activity is to present a changing exhibitions program of artistic excellence and originality, supported by talks and publications. A great deal of this program is curated, commissioned and produced by the Museum; however with only a very small staff and modest resources the program also includes selected touring exhibitions, for example, from partner museums within the university sector and institutions such as the National Gallery of Australia and the War Memorial.

The University of South Australia is a very young institution, formed from the amalgamation of several smaller institutions in 1992. The Samstag Museum started life as the College Gallery in one of those antecedent institutions, at a bleak suburban campus located well outside of the city. In 1998 the gallery was renamed the University Art Museum and relocated to a refurbished warehouse adjoining the University's city west campus on North Terrace.

The first exhibition in this temporary space—in a partnership established with the Adelaide Festival—was Jenny Holzer's major installation *Lustmord*, curated by Juliana Engberg. Museum staff still remember the exhilaration of having an international artist of Holzer's calibre personally setting up her work in that modest utilitarian space. It was through this strategic platform that the University Art Museum became visible to the University decision-makers, just as they were making plans for establishing an ambitious head office building—to be built on the Art Museum's temporary site.

In fact, the Samstag Museum of Art became possible because UniSA's Vice Chancellor at the time, Denise Bradley, believed that a first-class university art museum, located centrally in the city, could make a leading contribution to the Australian tertiary education sector, and the intellectual and cultural life of South Australia. Vice Chancellor Bradley also had a vision that, by committing to a wide community role, the fledgling University of South Australia could in time achieve a sophisticated cultural identity in the tradition of the great international universities. It was indeed crucial to have the Vice Chancellor's support for the Museum's ambitious rebuilding. Her indispensable executive advocacy could be described as institutional philanthropy.



**Samstag Museum:  
A Large Brief for  
a Hungry City**

As public galleries with a serious role in the presentation, education and development of the nation's visual arts, university art museums don't exist in isolation from a larger context, nor from a local one. In 1998, when the proposal for what is now the Samstag Museum of Art was being developed, Adelaide shared the dubious distinction, with Darwin, of being the only mainland capital cities with just one public art gallery with a relatively large scale and operational scope. These circumstances reflected the South Australian government's reluctance to sustain the investment in cultural infrastructure that had begun in the progressive Don Dunstan era. To this day in South Australia, arts ministers and premiers alike enthusiastically invoke the name of Dunstan at arts events, while in camera voting down proposals for arts development.

In this milieu, there had long been community talk about the pressing need for a contemporary exhibitions gallery in Adelaide to complement the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA). For all its virtues, AGSA could not alone facilitate the scope of visual art cultural activity for which there is a recognised audience in any modern city. Adelaide and South Australia were missing out. Enter the University of South Australia and its plan, already underway, to construct a brand new art museum on North Terrace, as part of an extensive capital works program. Already visible with a credible national identity, the University Art Museum offered a compelling case for becoming the second major public gallery for South Australia.

While the state government was expected to make an in-principle contribution to the University's capital works program, its modest \$3 million came with a surprising and shrewd caveat—that the University devote all of those funds towards building the new University Art Museum, the cost of which was estimated at around \$15 million. This meant that when the new Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art subsequently opened, it would carry implicit obligations towards a wide community demographic, beyond the University, as a default Museum of Contemporary Art for Adelaide.

**Samstag Museum:  
Home at Hawke**

In a city renowned for its heritage colonial architecture, the Hawke Building makes a bold contemporary statement as an iconic architectural landmark on Adelaide's cultural boulevard North Terrace. It is principally a civic building, and the Samstag Museum is just one of a wide array of public functions within it that reflect the University's aspirations for cultural engagement with the community and enrichment of student life. The complexity of the Hawke Building design presented challenges to the architect—both conceptually and in terms of the building's engineering—and it is salutary to note that the Samstag Museum emerged from these many considerations with the pre-eminent ground-floor entrance location, and the prime strategic role of welcoming visitors into the building.

Architecture either allows, or denies. To John Wardle's everlasting credit, he ultimately re-engineered the entire Hawke Building, so that the Samstag Museum's main ground-floor gallery could have optimal scale and proportion.



Figure 2. Roy Ananda: *Slow crawl into infinity* exhibition installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2014. Photograph by Sam Noonan.



**Inside the Samstag  
Museum of Art**

The size of public gallery spaces has tended progressively to increase over the years, largely in response to the challenge of ambitious contemporary art and a need for greater flexibility. It was therefore vital that the Museum be adaptable and have particular functional capabilities in order to accommodate the unpredictable imaginations of artists, as well as the physical and technical standards that would satisfy the increasingly strict requirements of lenders.



Figure 3. *Colliding Worlds* exhibition installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2009. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

It is not until a visitor actually enters the Samstag Museum, directly off from the Hawke Building foyer, that the visitor sees with some surprise how it occupies two levels, with a dramatic ten-metre high, cathedral-like atrium drawing the eye upwards. Yet because the upstairs galleries are only partially visible from downstairs, a pervasive sense of mystery—and imminent discovery—adds anticipation and excitement to the experience. There is also a distinctive masculine tone to the architecture of the gallery—a factor in this may be the concrete ceilings and powerful overhead beams. Yet it all remains entirely graceful.

The two levels of the Museum—a design feature unavoidably dictated by the Hawke Building envelope—comprise a 300 square metre downstairs gallery, named Gallery One, and two galleries upstairs: Gallery Two, which is 150 square metres, and the small but extremely strategic Gallery Three, which is 50 square metres. Spanning the atrium upstairs is a transit bridge that provides additional display walls, while also providing views between the upper and lower gallery levels and a dynamic visual interaction with works of art, and the architecture.

Throughout both levels, the walls are almost five metres high. A lift within the gallery provides transit for visitors between the ground floor and upstairs galleries, in addition to a stairway from the foyer outside. Museum-standard climate control operates in all exhibition and storage areas, with gallery services strategically concealed along ceilings and behind floating timber floors that soften the line of floor- and wall-based installations.

There are many hidden features for enhancing the display of works of art in the Museum's gallery spaces. The display walls are engineered to accommodate works of art weighing up to 500 kg. Reinforced suspension points in the exposed concrete beams each hold weights of up to one tonne, capable of carrying a motorcar. Specialized track lighting on a dimmer system ensures flexibility for lighting a range of exhibitions and installations.



One key aspect of the Samstag Museum has been the huge investment in audiovisual (AV) power and data points, which are concealed in the ceilings and under the floor, enabling the display of AV almost anywhere in the Museum. A number of the gallery display walls provide access, behind the wall, for inserting video screens and power cables. It has also been a huge advantage for Samstag that universities have led the network revolution in providing high-speed data transfer, a resource that has pointed the Museum's programming strengths in this direction, as demonstrated by the Museum's 2013 exhibition of Daniel Crooks's multi-media practice.

The Museum has a back-of-house storage area of approximately 200 square meters, smaller than ideal, but adequate, and a loading dock managed through a 16 tonne dock-leveler. A special gallery wall designed as a pivot door, adjacent to the loading dock, can be swung open, allowing a sizeable caravan to drive into the gallery. There is also a major destination work of public art at the Museum's ground-level entrance—*Different Forms of Intelligence*—created by the celebrated South Australian artist Fiona Hall, and produced in collaboration with the Museum and architect as a major commission for the Hawke Building.

**Samstag Museum:  
It's about the Art**



Figure 4. Lynette Wallworth: *Duality of Light* exhibition installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2009. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

It is the combination of the brief's very considered specifications, employed successfully with architectural intelligence, that has enabled the Samstag Museum to develop an artistic program of the most varied and ambitious kind. Where originally there were concerns that a two-level gallery would present installation challenges and limits to what could be presented in the upstairs galleries, it transpired that the Museum's spacious ground floor gallery has become the natural site for robust, large-scale displays. Constraints of access to the upstairs spaces for installation have actually helped shape the programming priorities.

Not everything in art worth the looking is large, and certain kinds of work are shown to much greater advantage in more modest spaces. The exhibition *Narelle Jubelin: Vision in Motion* (2013), developed by the University Art Gallery, University of Sydney, in association with the Samstag Museum of Art and Monash University Museum of Art, presented Jubelin's detailed petit-point works to brilliant advantage in the elegant intimacy of the upstairs galleries, whereas had the work been placed in the larger downstairs

space, it would have been visually diminished and lost. Visitors to this exhibition lingered long, contemplating the work, as if held by a friendly hand in a magic cave of treasures.

The split gallery levels also create dramatic viewing experiences. Works displayed in the large ground floor gallery present interesting perspectives and juxtapositions when viewed from upstairs. This has been an effective feature of the Samstag Museum and significantly influenced the Museum's exhibition planning and installation strategies. The Museum's upstairs Gallery 3, designed principally as a new-media black box, has worked brilliantly for moving-image work by such diverse artists as William Kentridge, Warwick Thornton, Lynette Wallworth and Bill Viola. But it has been equally effective to present works by other kinds of artists, such as Bill Henson, or Yvonne Koolmatrjie.



**Samstag Museum:  
Anything Goes**

Over the years, the Samstag Museum has produced an enormous number of original projects, far too numerous to talk about here. But there are some that have met with spectacular success, and there are several projects of which the Museum's staff are particularly proud. Before concluding, this paper mentions just a couple of these, to give a more complete picture of the Museum.

To date, by far the most complex and challenging project has been the Jeffrey Smart retrospective, *Master of Stillness: Jeffrey Smart paintings 1940–2011*, curated by Barry Pearce. This exhibition, presented at the Samstag Museum in late 2012 and toured to the Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Victoria, in 2013, was, in its way, the most successful and accomplished exhibition that the Museum has independently produced. At the end of his life, Jeffrey Smart became freshly honoured in the city where he began his career, and the project provided enormous satisfaction to the Museum's small professional staff of two curators and two curatorial assistants, and demonstrated that a university art museum could achieve something quite equal to any museum, of any level.



Figure 5. *Master of Stillness: Jeffrey Smart paintings 1940-2011* exhibition installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2012. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

The Samstag Museum was host to a Bill Henson exhibition late in 2011, and was pleased to add a prime work of his to the University collection. As part of this project Samstag sponsored a compelling public conversation between Henson and Paul Grabowsky to an appreciative standing-room-only audience in the large Hawke Building auditorium.

In Adelaide, a great many people imagine that Samstag is extremely well-resourced, because so many of the things it does are ambitious and clearly expensive. But in fact, the Museum has modest means, with its recurrent money coming entirely from the University. What Samstag has been able to do, however, is to forge relationships that have enabled the Museum to accomplish things it could not do, by itself. One partnership has been with the Adelaide Festival, with whom Samstag has so far presented three large biennial exhibitions of international art, called the *Adelaide International*, along with the enduring Artists' Week symposium.

Perhaps the Museum's most special and creative partnership has been with the Adelaide Film Festival, which has now led to three collaborative projects of exceptional artistic standard. Through this partnership, generously assisted by the Adelaide Film Festival's Investment





Fund, moving-image artists have been commissioned to create original projects for presentation at Samstag. The first commissioned artist was Lynette Wallworth, with her marvellous, interactive work *Duality of Light* in 2009, followed by Warwick Thornton's utterly surprising 3D film *Stranded*, in 2011. The third commissioning was a remarkable installation by the internationally acclaimed new-media artist Daniel Crooks, which, as previously mentioned, was presented in 2013.



Figure 6. *Bill Henson: early work from the MGA collection, with selected recent landscapes* exhibition installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2011. Photograph by Mick Bradley.

### A Case Study of the Samstag Museum's Strengths and Weaknesses



Figure 7. *Daniel Crooks, Pan No. 11 (cross-platform transfer)* exhibition installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2013. Photograph by Sam Noonan.



The *Daniel Crooks* exhibition usefully illuminates both the strengths and modest weaknesses of the Samstag Museum in relation to its architecture, vis-a-vis exhibition design. Requiring highly original exhibition design solutions and a warrior approach to planning, *Daniel Crooks* was a whole-of-gallery exhibition that comprised projections and multiple flat-screen displays in the Museum's upstairs galleries, and a major, newly-commissioned single work, *Pan No. 11 (cross-platform transfer)*, 2013, filling the entire downstairs gallery.

One of Samstag's great strengths as a two-level space for art is its flexibility: it can convert with ease from a white cube to a black box, and—if required—accommodate both these fundamentally different forms of display simultaneously. High-speed data transfer facilities are readily available throughout all the spaces. These attributes especially suit the presently dominant contemporary mediums of film-based, multi-media, video and sound works.

In the case of Crooks—a video artist working at the extreme high end of digital innovation—the challenge was twofold. First, to effectively realise the ambitious vision of the artist's previously un-exhibited work, in a multi-projection display that ensured its dramatic power was fully and appropriately revealed. Secondly, to design a bespoke system of very large-scale, floor-based, folding screens (to facilitate the projected 5-channel digital video) and install these without penetrating and damaging Samstag's expensive timber floor.

In the context of contemporary art's unpredictable display requirements (and the often-uncompromising expectations of artists), a precious floor is limiting. Yet, thus far, Samstag has successfully accommodated the most physically challenging of installs. The Museum's most vexing problem, in fact, has been an occasional 'sound bleed', where different video installations that contain sound—and sharing the large open spaces at Samstag—might overlap intrusively. This problem has been managed by constructing sound-proof cubicles, or having some works accessed with headphones, while pragmatically accepting this effect as an attribute of the exhibition.

A brilliant example of Samstag's flexible strengths, architecturally, was the celebrated display of selected works—most of them unusually large in scale and with stringent display requirements—loaned exclusively to Samstag by Sydney's White Rabbit Gallery, which had not previously shared its treasures in this way. It was of course the outstanding architectural character of the Samstag Museum which, in large part, engendered the lender's confidence to undertake this ambitious collaboration.



Figure 8. *White Rabbit—Contemporary Chinese Art Collection* exhibition installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2011. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

The craft of intelligent display is integral to revealing the meanings of art and encouraging audience engagement. In this, an organic hands-on knowledge and experience of the physical space is a crucial element in any gallery for the successful presentation of sophisticated exhibitions. At Samstag, there are particular attributes to the three different gallery spaces, over two levels—lines of sight, views from below to the upper galleries (and vice versa), ratios of space and lighting options—that will inform the development of an exhibition concept, long before its installation.

While the Museum does occasionally experience a 'failed' display strategy, it is almost exclusively in cases where an external curator pursues the development of their project, focussed myopically on 'concept', without regard for the particularities of the space within which the works will eventually be displayed. Typically, in such instances, there will have been insufficient advance consultation with the experienced Samstag staff. One example is the curatorially outsourced 'Adelaide International' exhibition, *Worlds in Collision* (2014), where miscalculations in the selection of works and their potential relationship to the Samstag spaces diminished the end result.

In summary, the Samstag Museum comprises a complex of galleries and associated features that, architecturally, have been carefully conceived to enhance the display of art—in multiple forms—rather than hinder it. The spaces are physically refined, large in scale and with appealing, considered ratios. Within this there are some particularly strong features whose impact on display should not be underestimated, for example the masculine concrete beams across gallery ceilings and the split levels that visually intersect. The display of art within this environment is a unique creative opportunity, but it is also a challenge demanding curatorial intelligence. Broadly speaking, curators either successfully reflect on, and grasp, the amenable nature of the spaces and their strong features, or, by giving inadequate consideration to their attributes and potential, they fail.

## Conclusion

It is important to mention, by way of conclusion, the exhibition with which the Samstag Museum of Art was opened in 2007, and which served as a statement of values. Called *Wonderful World*, it was about the mysterious alchemies that make art such a special part of human existence. What was especially pleasing to Samstag staff, however, was the reaction of the audiences that came to this exhibition and were having their absolutely first experience of the brand new art museum: they were shocked, and excited. They had neither anticipated that the Samstag Museum of Art would be so grand, and so beautiful, nor that Adelaide was capable of presenting contemporary art with such convincing ambition, panache and style.



**Erica Green /**

Director, Anne & Gordon  
Samstag Museum of Art /  
University of South Australia /  
Erica.Green@unisa.edu.au

Erica Green is founding director of the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, established in 2007 at the University of South Australia, Adelaide. Over a career of thirty years in the professional visual arts, she has achieved renown for her enterprise and leadership as an art museum manager, curator and arts administrator nationally, and in South Australia in particular, curating or managing over 100 original exhibitions. As director of the Samstag Museum of Art, she is responsible for commissioning and developing the Museum's exhibitions and public programs. She additionally manages the University Art Collection; the Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships program; and the University of South Australia's many cultural partnerships.

