

NORBERT LOEFFLER: SENIOR LECTURER AND ART HISTORIAN

Background



Norbert Walter Loeffler was born about 1945 in East Germany, under Soviet occupation, then moved to Hamburg in West Germany, where his mother came from: "I grew up there and my first two years of school were at a wonderful modern Steiner Waldschule where my interest in art of all kinds began early by the age of eight years." Norbert Loeffler and his mother came to Australia in 1955 and they settled in St Albans: "... at the outer reaches of the western suburbs, in a half-house, very small, in the middle of a paddock, unmade roads, no sewage, where the immigrants in the mid 1950s ended up in large numbers."

In 1952 an assisted immigration agreement was made with the Federal Republic of Germany that was effective for five years. By December 1957 there were 37,000 Germans who arrived in Australia under this agreement. In 1986 there were 1,066 people in St Albans who were born in Germany (2.1% of the population) and 932 persons said they spoke German at home.

The Loeffler family had settled in St Albans by 1957 as Norbert was a player with the St Albans Ajax soccer club from 1958 to 1960.



Norbert Loeffler (front left) under-16 Ajax soccer team 1959.

Norbert attended St Albans High School in the 1960s: "When I went to high

school, the school was unbuilt, lacked furniture, lacked enough rooms; we had classes in the shelter sheds, classes in a little tin shed or the Nissen hut down the road and, of course, of the people who began in the school, about 120 in first form, only about eight managed to get to tertiary education. The others ended up in a factory or in an office. The school was a problem, it wasn't a fault of the teachers, it was the fault of the system that couldn't keep up with demand; there was also an extreme shortage of teachers."

Norbert left at the end of Form 4 when he was aged 16: "I abandoned high school in fourth form — better to get a job offering a small salary and giving me freedom than being stuck sitting in a classroom being bored, learning nothing. In other words, I didn't need education. I needed to learn. I worked in a bank, retail, various factories, and for a year as wharf labourer – all the work was easy and gave me time and money to learn and be involved in the increasing cultural events in Melbourne."

"Dull as Melbourne was about 1960, there was still a fair bit to offer, and I started to regularly go to the city and search for galleries, bookshops, and you could find them bit by bit, for example, I saw *The Family of Man* in 1959, I saw it two or three times ... there was nobody else, from memory, in the room."

"There was the Melbourne University Film Society, the annual Melbourne Film Festival with huge crowds, the Carlton Film Co-op, the new small cinemas screening the latest films from France, Sweden, Japan, etc., the new Melbourne Theatre Co., followed by La Mama, the Pram Factory, the opening of the new NGV and The Field show, Strine, Tolarno, Pinacotheca Galleries, and the new bookshops with the books of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Fanon, Arendt, Sontag, Greenberg, Lippard ... I moved to Carlton c. 1965 and became involved with all the above. I also applied for a junior position at the ABC several times without a response."

In an unconventional scenario for the times, he returned to St Albans High eight years later, in 1969, at the age of 24 to finish his secondary education and gain entrance to a university: "My experience and knowledge at this time had me appointed to various leadership positions, used as a part-time teacher, and be the full-time art teacher of the senior art class."



His extra curricular activities included being part of the school magazine team and he was also President of the Students Representative Council office bearers, which that year included other notables such as Noel Scheurer and Colin Baulch. In 1969 he was politically active with the Equality in

Education Campaign that was organised by Uldis Ozolins from Melbourne University. Norbert and a few other students would meet in the main shopping centre of St Albans on Saturday mornings handing out pamphlets and speaking to people in the street about the importance of equality in education. He came back to the school in 1971 as a member of the school's Advisory Council, so his commitment to the school had been extended beyond the norm.



Norbert Loeffler (second last row, second from left) and other prefects, 1969.

Inequality in Education - Do Parents Care?

(This article was published in Alba 1969 and has been attributed to Norbert Loeffler.)

Education should provide equal opportunity for all people, regardless of their class, religion, family background or where they live. Through education each child should be able to succeed or fail as any other child. This is equality.

At the present there is a crisis in our education system, which particularly affects the children in communities such as this, where overcrowding in classrooms and under-staffed schools lacking in teaching equipment are the rule. Your children are being discriminated against by an education system which is favoring a privileged few.

This can be proved in several ways:

The further you go towards the north (Broadmeadows) and the west (Sunshine, St. Albans) of Melbourne, the poorer the school is likely to be, and the less the chances of its students gaining financial aid from scholarships and University places.

At the moment the fact is that only one in 21 children of unskilled and semi-skilled fathers are accepted into general tertiary education (university, technical and teaching colleges), although they comprise one in three of all school leavers.

On the other hand the further east and south (Camberwell, Brighton) you go the better will be the school facilities and the better the chances of its students.

If we compare the above figures against those of the children of professional fathers who constitute only one in 20 of school leavers, we find one in three manage to reach tertiary institutes.

Schools in the wealthier areas benefit in two ways. Their students come from homes in suburbs where they get a better preparation for education because they can afford to pay more to help the school provide an adequate education. The government gives money to schools according to the amount they have been able to raise themselves regardless of the needs of the schools, so that schools in wealthy areas which are able to raise a lot of money themselves are also given a lot by the government. But the Poorer schools which are unable to raise much and are really in need of it get just as little as they raise. The result is that those who need the most assistance get the least.

If one adds to this the fact that students now in their first three years of secondary education have only one chance in four of being taught by a qualified teacher, one can begin to understand why students from working-class areas have difficulties at school, and drop out at an early age. It has been proved that the economically disadvantaged classes represent the greatest proportion of early school leavers.

What can be done about a situation which is bad both for the community and the individual? Should not a more equal economic assistance be given to the students who have social disadvantages to keep them at school? Should they not have equal schools, instead of the worst? Should they not have teachers who are specially trained to help them overcome these disadvantages and problems?

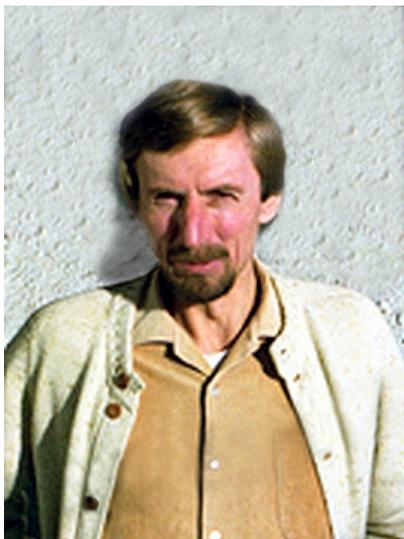
Letter of Application, George Washington University

(The following extract is from an application Norbert made to get into a Master's Degree in Art History program in the USA, which was accepted by the American

University.)

I was born in Germany in 1944. My family immigrated to Australia in 1955. I am still literate in German. Because of need, I left St Albans High School at the end of fourth form, when sixteen years old. For the next eight years, I worked first as a bank employee, then as a retail department manager and staff-training officer, and finally—for experience—as a roustabout. Privately, in this period I continued my education, and I became involved in the Melbourne art world; art had been my original career choice. In 1969 I resumed my formal education, finished high school, and gained a Federal Government scholarship, awarded to the top 15% of students, which financed my course at Melbourne University. My major fields of study were Literature and Arts History. I have completed three years of a four years combined honours degree—giving me a B.A. The latter part of the degree I abandoned because of my dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching and course content.

In addition to my studies, I was the Vice-President of the Students Representative Council for one year and Education Officer for two years. This involved me in the major political issues of the early 1970s and the promotion of reform at all levels of education: I instigated campaigns to highlight inequalities in education; organised, directed and taught at university summer school for disadvantaged secondary students; ran conferences; organised community education action committees; and effected changes in university education. And, during my second year at university, I worked part-time as an education research worker for the state association of school councils. After university, I still did one year of teacher training for a Diploma of Education.



Because of my education knowledge and teaching experience, I became part of a small group of students exempted from conventional teacher training; instead we were placed in ‘disadvantaged’ schools as teacher aides and did community welfare work. I also was given permission to teach (part-time) a final year high school art class, and I was seconded for most of the year by the Australian Council of Educational Research to work in the education section of the National Poverty Inquiry, then under way; my job was to supervise a group of six student researchers and to interview and write profiles of school drop-outs.

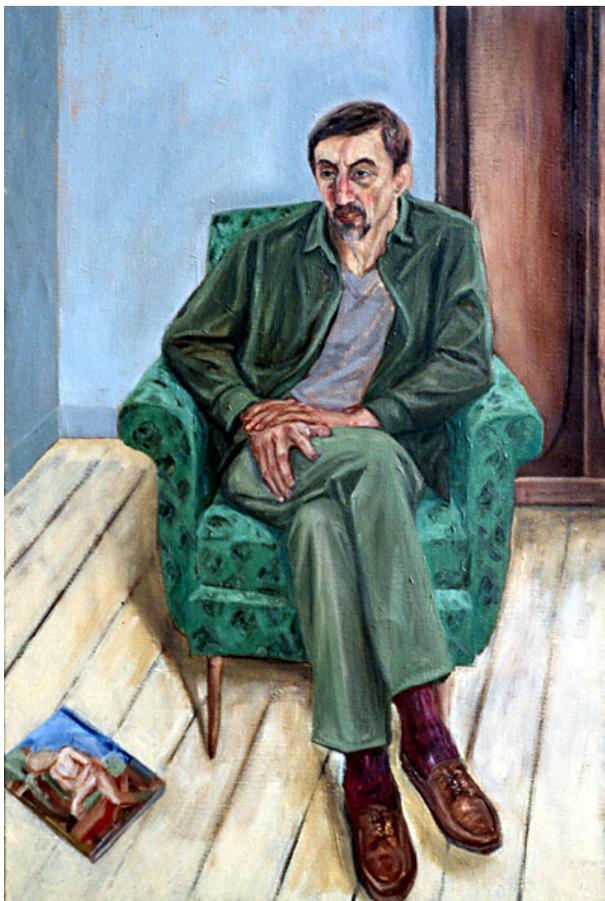
When this year finished, I was immediately hired by the Prahran College of Advanced Education, one of Australia’s leading art schools, as an art history lecturer. Over the last three years, I have evolved new courses and almost alone taught the (approximately) 150 students in our painting, sculpture, printmaking,

drawing and photography departments.

In a typical week I gave two lectures: for all first year students, an introduction to modern art; and for second year students a mixed group of lectures on influential twentieth century artists and movements, and some revisionist lectures on traditional artists/periods, and some lectures on areas of special interest, such as Oriental Art, Primitivism, etc. All first and second-year students receive separate tutorials from me on the history, theory and practice of their respective mediums. As well, I take some seminars with third-year students.

To evolve a curriculum as full and varied as this has taken three years. I have twice been overseas to study art works and to collect books and slides: in the winter of 1975–6 for two months to the USA and again in 1976–7 for one month to the USA and another to Europe. I am applying for enrollment at the George Washington University, and if accepted I want to research the sources of American Art since the 1940s: the people, the landscape, the culture, and the intellectual context from which the art sprang. More generally, I want to closely acquaint myself with the art in galleries and the recent developments in contemporary art. Other attractions are that G.W. has an art school and a museum studies course.

In my time in the USA, I want to look at the workings of art schools. And my own college is presently establishing Australia's first museum studies course. I have been assured that my job will be held over until I return. A further reason for



going to Washington is that several good friends live there. Some of these are graduate students at G.W. Up to this time I have not published anything, although recently I wrote two short articles for John Davis (one of my referees) for him to use as an introduction to his work at the Indian Triennial and the Venice Biennial.

Norbert Loeffler, 1978.

Career in Art History and Theory

Norbert Loeffler has been a recognised art historian, lecturer and critic since the 1980s. In 1972 Loeffler was coordinating a summer school at Melbourne University through the Secondary Students Union, an activity

that even achieved some publicity in *The Age*. He taught art history at Prahran College and was a casual academic at RMIT. He joined the National Gallery Art School which became the Victorian College of the Arts and is now part of the Melbourne University, where Loeffler was employed as a senior lecturer in art history and theory and has worked there for many years. As an art critic he contributed to the debate about modern art, such as the controversy of Bill Henson's photography and the morality of exhibiting a dying man as an art object.

He has travelled extensively in pursuit of art appreciation and has led his visual arts students from the Victorian College of the Arts and members of the public to explore, for example, contemporary and classic art in Communist China through Beijing, Shanghai and Singapore. His international interests have included developments and trends in German painting and art since the nation's reunification, about which he lectured for the Goethe Institute.

In 2014 he was awarded the Distinguished Teacher Award for his work on promoting and supporting the arts.

Tin Shed Anniversary and Launch of St Albans History book



Bruce Anderson, Nick Szwed, Norbert Loeffler; St Albans Tin Shed, 2004.

Promoting the Arts



Norbert Loeffler with Janice and Noel Richards, 2012.



Norbert Loeffler with Su Baker, 2014.

Article written by Joseph Ribarow.

School photographs courtesy of Nick Szwed.

Painting of Loeffler by Gabrielle Martin, 1993; <http://www.gabriellemartin.com.au/early-work/>

Ajax soccer team image from Desira & Curmi, Green Gully Soccer Club 50 Years.

Background information from the archives of Lorna Cameron.

Quotations about settling in St Albans from <https://prahranlegacy.org/2025/06/05/the-lecturers-norbert-loeffler/>