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Branding time at the Oz Co. Corral

Can the arts be treated as a 'brand'?

Shayne
HIGSON

Politics on the beach



Plus: Fairfax Collection; Peppimenarti; Strutt sisters; Overrated & Underrated

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03

BRANDING TIME AT THE OZ CO. CORRAL

Can the arts be treated as a 'brand'?
The Australia Council seems to think so.
John McDonald and John Kelly
think otherwise.

For most people the term 'branding' probably conjures up thoughts of Lorne Greene and the boys from the Ponderosa applying the hot iron to another cow's hindquarters. Perhaps this is not too far from the way the term is used by the advertising industry, in referring to the way a product is emblazoned on the memory of the hapless consumer. In theory, a successful act of 'branding' induces the customer to recognise one particular label from a mass of competing labels, all offering similar products or services. Which bank? Which soft drink? Which detergent?

It was, therefore, a remarkable step in the evolution of Australian culture when in 2000 our federal arts funding body, The Australia Council, released *Australians and the Arts* – a specially-commissioned report from the advertising agency, Saatchi and Saatchi, which raised the possibility of "branding the arts." The idea appealed to the Australia Council, which has adopted it as a key strategy. This leads to some fundamental questions: Is 'The Arts' (Yartz?) one version of a particular product that can be distinguished from its competitors by a creative marketing campaign? Will we learn to prefer Arts to Sports, for instance, with a little help from Saatchi and Saatchi?

Artist John Kelly, now resident in Europe, has been watching the process from afar, and monitoring its progress on the Australia Council website. John has written an open letter to the Prime-Minister about the issue, which may be found in its entirety on the AAR site (www.artreview.com.au). His fundamental point is that "branding" is about "homogeneity and conformity... it is entirely at odds with our rich, diverse heritage and artistic culture. It raises the



Blot on the landscape, 2002, by John Kelly, painted bronze and stainless steel, 95 cm (height). Courtesy Niagara Galleries.

Instead of trying to short-circuit the mechanisms of the capitalist market, the Council is now embracing them most warmly.

question of what will happen to all the art that does not fit the image of the new brand?"

What indeed? The bureaucratisation of the arts in this country has been progressing at full throttle for more than a decade. Among other strokes of genius there was last year's idea that artists should be paid an hourly wage for their work, with two levels of pay for 'emerging' and 'established' artists. It would, of course, be up to the über-bureaucracy – Australia Council or similar – to decide when an artist should be promoted from one level to the next. Demotion was apparently impossible, except by death. It was also unclear whether an artist would be paid only for the time spent in active work, or for the time spent staring at a blank canvas or a hunk of clay, waiting for the Muse to whisper something into his or her ear.

Compared to these schemes, which disappeared into thin air, 'branding' sounds almost pragmatic. Instead of trying to short-circuit the mechanisms of the capitalist market, the Council is now embracing them most warmly. In this, it has achieved a new symbiosis with a government that has made Australia a paradise for the big accountancy firms, who have picked up one lucrative 'consultancy' after another – every time a department wants to justify cost cutting, restructuring or staff retrenchments. In the arts, the National Gallery of Australia has led the way, having spent well in excess of a million dollars on consultants during the term of the current director. The other growth area has been in the profession of 'spin doctor', and needless to say, the NGA has one of them too.

Since the PM is known to dislike 'elites', whom he suspects of disliking *him*, it may be a shrewd move for organisations such as the Australia Council to employ a group of high-powered consultants to help present the arts as democratic and user-friendly. This implies a fundamental levelling-out, bringing the arts into line with the tastes and expectations of those legendary Ordinary Australians. (Surely this is what the official decoration, 'OA', stands for?). Such activities feed a growing suspicion that organisations such as the Australia Council and the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA), are devoting an increasing amount of time and resources into a justification of their own existence in the face of (perceived) government hostility. Yet such navel-gazing has the obvious side-effect of making these bodies less relevant to the local artists and arts organisations who should be their strongest supporters.

This is reminiscent of the way trade unions have been complicit in their own decline – reacting to falling memberships by stacking their hierarchies with would-be politicians with university degrees, rather than veterans of the workplace. In similar fashion, the arts sector is breeding administrators with relevant diplomas but little first-hand experience of working with artists. The end result is conformity and sterility, with creativity tailored to suit marketing requirements and the results of opinion polls. If the Australia Council feels this charge is unfair and untrue, how can they justify the ongoing preoccupation with 'branding'?

John Kelly has extracted a collection of found 'poems' from the Australia Council website that sum up the creative and intellectual value of this exercise. Here are two examples:

From Mr...Strategic Planner, Saatchi and Saatchi
... the term 'the arts' is very much a 'brand'...

... strategies proposed in this study
are intended to redress what appear to be the deficiencies in
that brand image...

"RECOMMENDATION ...
"... that the arts relates to the public with a 'brand personality'
that has characteristically Australian qualities of being
down-to-earth and accessible."

The arts sector
might well take a leaf out of the modern Australian cookbook.

to promote the value of the arts ...
will have the associated benefit of helping to
bake 'new audience cakes'

THE
CENTRAL MESSAGE
FROM SAATCHI & SAATCHI
is:
ome Australians love the arts,
others don't

a message
that reflects
perceptions

Simple? Yes.
Obvious?

It is for readers to interpret for themselves how relevant this
information is to their own lives and
to their work.

The above word play was created from text extracted from *Australians and the Arts*. The central message
from Saatchi & Saatchi by Paul Costantou, Strategic Planner, Saatchi & Saatchi. Cost to the Australia
Council approx. \$300,000

From the Chair
This report
interprets
from the quantitative and qualitative
strategies for the future

the arts
tends to have a meaning
rarely questioned
which is extremely indeterminate

shows us
the monolithic-sounding phrase the arts
has to be unpacked
in the mind of every individual

measuring the value
and developing strategies to promote this value
are demanding
though not impossible tasks

The knowledge this...contributes
will...show our community...how in shaping a vision
we must...thank
Saatchi & Saatchi

This word play was made by extracting text from the introduction by Jennifer Bott CEO and Margaret
Seares, Chair of the Australia Council, which was contained within 'Australians and the Arts', a report by
Saatchi and
Saatchi in association with the Australia Council.

It could easily be argued that advertising is very much part of the arts.

Thank you, thank you, Saatchi & Saatchi. And a special big thank you to Sandra Yates, chair of Saatchi & Saatchi, Australia. In recent years Sandra has also been chair of the Australia Council's media and arts committee; chair of the Board of the Sydney Writers Festival; Chair of the TAFE board of NSW, on the board of Musica Viva; and a judge for what an Australian Council press release terms: a "Prestigious New Award for partnerships between the Media and the Arts" in March 2002. Sandra sits on many committees and speaks at many conferences, she has a "passion for the arts" and for advertising.

Advertising, Sandra maintains, is about persuading people to change their minds through understanding and trust. Rather than view it as an instrument for social engineering, we could consider advertising as a great tool for social good." (Gender and Cultural Diversity Matters National Centre for Gender & Cultural Diversity – Vol. 2/Issue 1, 2001 <http://www.sandrayates.com/sygender.html>)

This knits neatly with a claim on p.183 of *Australians and the Arts*: "...If the role of the arts is to capture attention, communicate a message and leave an emotional impression...then it could easily be argued that advertising is very much part of the arts, since this is exactly what effective advertising is designed to achieve..."

John Kelly points out that this spin is contradicted by Kevin Roberts, the worldwide CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, who says things like: "The role of advertising is to sell more stuff in 90 days. It's that simple." Mr. Roberts has also expressed reservations about the sacred gospel of 'branding', which he describes as a "wannabe science," suggesting the term has become "virtually meaningless."

Please don't tell Jennifer Bott, the CEO of the Australia Council, who, in a letter dated 26 May 2003, was prefiguring a "Branding the Arts campaign to encourage more Australians to appreciate their own creativity, and that of others..." Having spent all that money on a report that tells us some Australians love the arts and others don't, (and having heaped every accolade at the feet of St. Sandra Yates); the Australia Council is obviously obliged to keep up appearances. What matters from now on is to generate the impression of furious activity, with a carefully-documented tally of committee meetings, memos and interim reports. Get ready for one 'strategy' after another, pursuing the idea of 'branding' as far as it can go, before it is quietly dropped for being utterly impractical, if not pernicious.

John Kelly is an Australian artist based in France.



Eubena Nampitjin, 2003, Screenprint, Edition of 50, 104 x 70 cm (image); 121 x 80.5 cm (paper)

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