

JOHN KELLY

ART & BRANDING



An analysis by **John McDonald**

GREAT BRANDS generate strong emotional reactions in consumers. The best example is probably Coca-Cola, which became synonymous with all things patriotically American during the Second World War. In the 1960s, the brand hooked into the Counterculture, and pitched itself as *The Real Thing*. Through successive generations, Coke was presented as the magical elixir that smoothed over differences of class, race and age, bringing all Americans together as the proverbial big, happy family. Andy Warhol gave one of the best explanations of Coke's ultra-democratic ethos:

What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.

One can't make the same claims about the marketing tag-line for Moo Brew: *Not suitable for bogans*. This is not a drink that unites a community. Its market is an exclusive subculture of intelligent, sophisticated consumers – although the exclusivity may be questionable because few people would willingly identify as a “bogan” – Australian slang for an uncouth, vulgar person from the bottom of the social scale.

The tag-line is also a reaction to the way most Australian beers are pitched to consumers as celebrations of mateship, sports and the great outdoors. How many chants have been concocted by advertising agencies inviting us to join in with a yobbo's chorus singing the praises of some well-known brew? In most beer commercials the big joke is to make beer sound like the most important thing in every bloke's life. It's sad to think that for a significant percentage of consumers this may be the truth.

Twenty years ago there were relatively few beers on the market and brand loyalty was virtually tribal. Today there are more varieties but fewer owners, as Lion Nathan and the Foster's Group control every major brewery in Australia, apart from Coopers in Adelaide. This has been offset by the explosive growth of so-called microbreweries, pitching new, exotic beers to a more discerning market. David Walsh's Moo Brew has been one of the most successful of these new brands.

Walsh is known as the entrepreneur behind the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania, but before the museum was launched he was already working to revitalise the Morilla Estate, which he had purchased



from textile tycoon Claudio Alcorso. Along with the vineyard, Walsh worked to create dining facilities, luxury accommodation, and even a museum for his personal collection of antiquities.

MONA would open to the public in January 2011, a good five years after the Moo Brew launch. In *The Making of MONA*, Adrian Franklin sees the beer as a precursor to the museum, cautiously suggesting “the commercial success of Moo Brew changed David Walsh too, and prepared him for the bigger task of designing and launching MONA.” (p. 72)

From the beginning the thinking behind Moo Brew was markedly innovative. Walsh’s first departure from orthodoxy was the shape of the bottle, which resembles a midget champagne bottle. It announced that this was not your ordinary pub beer but a more rarefied and exclusive variety, which it is why it was more expensive than the average beer.

Walsh’s first idea for the label was to use an image of a sculpture that he owned – John Kelly’s *Three Stacked Cows* (2001). One can see the humorous appeal, as it appears these bloated cows have had a few too many ales and got themselves into a tangle. On second thoughts, wasn’t this just another gag, like so many of the advertisements used to sell mainstream beers? If Walsh wanted to sell a classier product, he needed a more sophisticated label.

Kelly felt that using the stacked cows was “trite” and it would be better if he were commissioned to design an entirely new set of labels. Working with

the man who would become MONA’s Creative Director, Leigh Carmichael, he came up with a series of strikingly minimal designs using two images that had become *leitmotifs* in his recent work: the logo used by the Australia Council, the federal government’s arts funding agency; and Sidney’s Nolan’s painting, *Moonboy* (1939-40).

Franklin describes a brief moment when the Morilla business managers hired a group of marketing people who objected to every decision that had already been made. They argued that “the name carried the association of milk, not beer; that the bottle shape was associated with champagne, and women rather than men; and the art would appeal to the ‘wrong’ sort of men (‘proper beer drinkers don’t do conceptual art’).” (p. 71)

Walsh and Carmichael finally decided to ignore the marketers’ objections and stick with their original hunch that there was an audience for such a beer and such a label. Their resolution paid off, with Carmichael taking out the Best Packaging Award at the Australian International Beer Awards of 2006, defeating 200 other contenders from around the world. The three inaugural varieties of Moo Brew – a pilsner, a pale ale and a wheat beer (or *Hefeweizen*, to give its original German title) would each be winners at the 2006 Australian Beer Awards.

The first thing one notices about the Kelly / Carmichael labels is that there is no writing. The name of the beer and the variety appear in small, discreet letters at the top of the bottle’s neck. The images are completely

enigmatic. The label on the pilsner bottle features a yellow disc with two round circles resembling eyes. Take a second look, and it is revealed as the hindquarters of a cow. At the bottom of the picture we see tiny legs and udders. For those who know their Australian art, it's a reference to Nolan's *Moonboy*, with the circles borrowed from the 'sun' image in the Australia Council logo.

The pale ale label shows a dark arch in a bare landscape, outlined against a grey, cloudy sky. Once again it is the sun disc from the Australia Council logo transformed into an imaginary monument, or the ominous symbol of a dark, colourless rainbow.

The logo is also preyed upon for the wheat beer label in which the circle floats suspended against the same grey sky. In the distance we see the stylised silhouette of the Oz Co kangaroo. In the actual logo the sun hangs in the sky behind the kangaroo, but Kelly has reversed the order with a tiny earthbound kangaroo chasing a sun-disc that has grown to gigantic proportions but does nothing to illuminate a gloomy landscape.

These labels had distinctly gothic overtones, but two new varieties would push the boundaries even further. The label for the *Moo Brew Dark Ale* looks like a version of the Pilsner image in a cave. The circles now resemble eyes glowing red in the darkness, while the lines, which may have stood for a cow's legs, have become fangs. This is a very dark beer indeed, not so much a refreshing drink as a stare into the abyss.



The penultimate variety, released in 2012, is the *Belgo* – a Belgian-style pale ale, which denotes ‘complexity’ to those who know their beers. Kelly responded with a label of equal complexity: a central shape that may be the head or hind-quarters of a cow, in which a pattern of black patches on white create a crucifix. One thinks of the crosses of Kazimir Malevich, or – for those immersed in the minutiae of the Australian art world – the imitations produced by local artist John Nixon, who glimpsed some previously unsuspected affinity between Melbourne and revolutionary Moscow.

A final Kelly image is emblazoned on the *Moo Brew Single Hop Can*, a daring transcription of the Australia Council logo in red on silver, but with added shadows and horizon line, and a kangaroo missing its front paws. It was perhaps inevitable that a beer called “single hop” should have a kangaroo on the tin. By now Kelly has virtually made this particular beast his own. It comes from a painting of 2005 called *Big foot*, that portrays the roo as a lonely monster staring out over a barren landscape. The marketing slogan for the beer was “Nowhere to hide.”

Even in a field as open to eccentricity and innovation as the burgeoning craft beer market, the Moo Brew labels are unique. Apart from being Australia’s only beer labels associated with an art museum, they contradict all the received wisdom about how to package and sell a commodity. Moo Brew is pitched to an audience that defines itself by what it is not. They are emphatically not the “bogans” who would be put off by a label that doesn’t even tell you the name of the beer.

A Moo Brew drinker is someone who enjoys the oblique packaging with its mysterious labels that demand to be interpreted as works of art. Yet few consumers would be aware of the background to Kelly’s images, which were inspired by a long-running feud with Australian arts bureaucracy, and a critical engagement with the phenomenon of ‘branding’ that has come to engulf the entire world. What began as a way of selling products has taken on a more universal dimension, with broad political and cultural implications.

We live today in a branded world. It’s a world in which the gulf between haves and have-nots keeps growing wider, where the wealth and power of multinational corporations exceeds that of many sovereign states. Art is one of the few areas that is resistant, though not immune, to branding, so when the Australia Council sponsored a report into “branding the arts,” John Kelly was inspired to explore this concept. The Moo Brew labels are but one outcome of his investigations.

Some background

JOHN KELLY was born in Bristol in 1965, but six months later was en route to Australia. He grew up in the outer Melbourne suburb of Sunshine, an area that is currently trying to shake off a reputation for crime and poverty. Kelly's studies in Fine Arts at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology were largely funded by his mother's winnings from a radio station competition.

A working-class background means that one takes nothing for granted, and Kelly has had to work for everything he has achieved as an artist. He also harbours a deep-rooted sense of fairness, which makes him sensitive to apparent injustices. This sense would emerge strongly in his long-running battles with the Australia Council.

A stint in England playing cricket in the Surrey County Championship alerted Kelly to his British heritage, but also made him more keenly appreciative



John Kelly: *Skull*, 2015, etching

of Australian art, particularly the work of Sidney Nolan, another Australian of Anglo-Irish stock, who spent much of his career living and working in England.

Back in Australia Kelly held his first solo exhibition at Niagara Galleries in 1988, and spent much of his time reading at the RMIT library, where he had a part-time job. In 1991 he commenced a Master of Arts degree, for which he wrote a thesis called *Simulacrum and Sophistry in Image Making*. It was a topic that would play a big part in his work. The research alerted him to William Dobell's activities during World War II, which allegedly included making a group of papier-mâché cows that were to be moved around a military base in the unlikely hope of fooling Japanese pilots.

Kelly was delighted by the absurdity of this project, and began the series of paintings called *Dobell's Cows*. The cows proved such a fertile source of inspiration they would dominate the artist's work from 1991 to 1996. Their popularity won Kelly many admirers, but also detractors who resented his success or simply felt he should have moved on to other topics. Conscious of this double-edged reaction, Kelly titled his 2000 show at Niagara Galleries *More Fucking Cows!*

For Robert Lindsay and other commentators, the "culmination" of Kelly's cows came in the form of the major sculpture, *Cow up a tree* (1999). This would be installed on the Champs-Élysées in Paris that same year, where it was displayed for four months as part of *Les Champs de la Sculpture*, a show that included work by 50 international sculptors. The piece would

eventually be acquired by Docklands, Melbourne, where it is on permanent display.

Kelly estimates that *Cow up a tree* was seen by millions during its season on the Champs-Élysées, which made him feel confident in asking for Australia Council assistance with his next major project, a large bronze public sculpture called *Three Stacked Cows*, to be installed in Monte Carlo, as part of an exhibition called *La Parade des Animaux*, from June to October 2002. The show featured works by 50 international artists, including Magdalena Abakanowicz, Arman, Miguel Barceló, Fernando Botero, Antoine Bourdelle, Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, Max Ernst, Keith Haring and Nikki de Saint-Phalle. Aside from the boost it gave his own profile, Kelly saw this as a great opportunity for an Australian artist to be seen in such company.

The costs of making a bronze sculpture 5 metres high, 7 metres in width and 1.5 metres in depth at the famous Coubertin foundry in Paris were considerable. On top of this came the cost of transport, installation, accommodation and so on. After an extensive correspondence with Council staff, Kelly was advised to apply for an Out-of-Time grant, which would partially cover airfares, accommodation and documentation. He requested \$10,000 from a projected budget of \$371,457, and was given \$5,000.

Apparently it was fairly standard practice with Out-of-Time grants to award applicants a portion of the sum requested, which allowed the committee's budget to stretch a little further. However, this was not mentioned in the grant application forms, nor had Kelly been informed that it was a possible

outcome. He was disappointed, and felt the process was flawed in several ways. For a start, the nature of the decision didn't seem to tally with advice he had been given when he had asked how to apply.

Kelly needed between \$30,000-\$50,000, but had been informed that "a reasonable amount for an individual would be approximately \$10,000." He framed his application accordingly. Had he known the committee had the right to reduce the amount according to their own discretion, he would have applied for a larger sum in the first place. In a six-page letter to the Australia Council (dated 17/12/01), he spelled out the reasons for his displeasure and requested a review of the decision.

That review was completed and forwarded to Kelly on 8 January 2002. The conclusion was "the information provided by staff has been appropriate and in good faith and has in no way adversely affected the applicant's chances or the Board's decision."

This did nothing to ameliorate Kelly's grievances. This time he replied with a 9-page letter, (12/1/02) analysing the review in painstaking detail and finding many apparent contradictions. It was no longer a matter of a \$5,000 shortfall in the sum requested, it was now a crusade against bureaucratic obfuscation.

Most applicants would have thrown in the towel at this point, but Kelly's stubbornness and determination were relentless. One can imagine his correspondents at the Australia Council rolling their eyes and gritting their

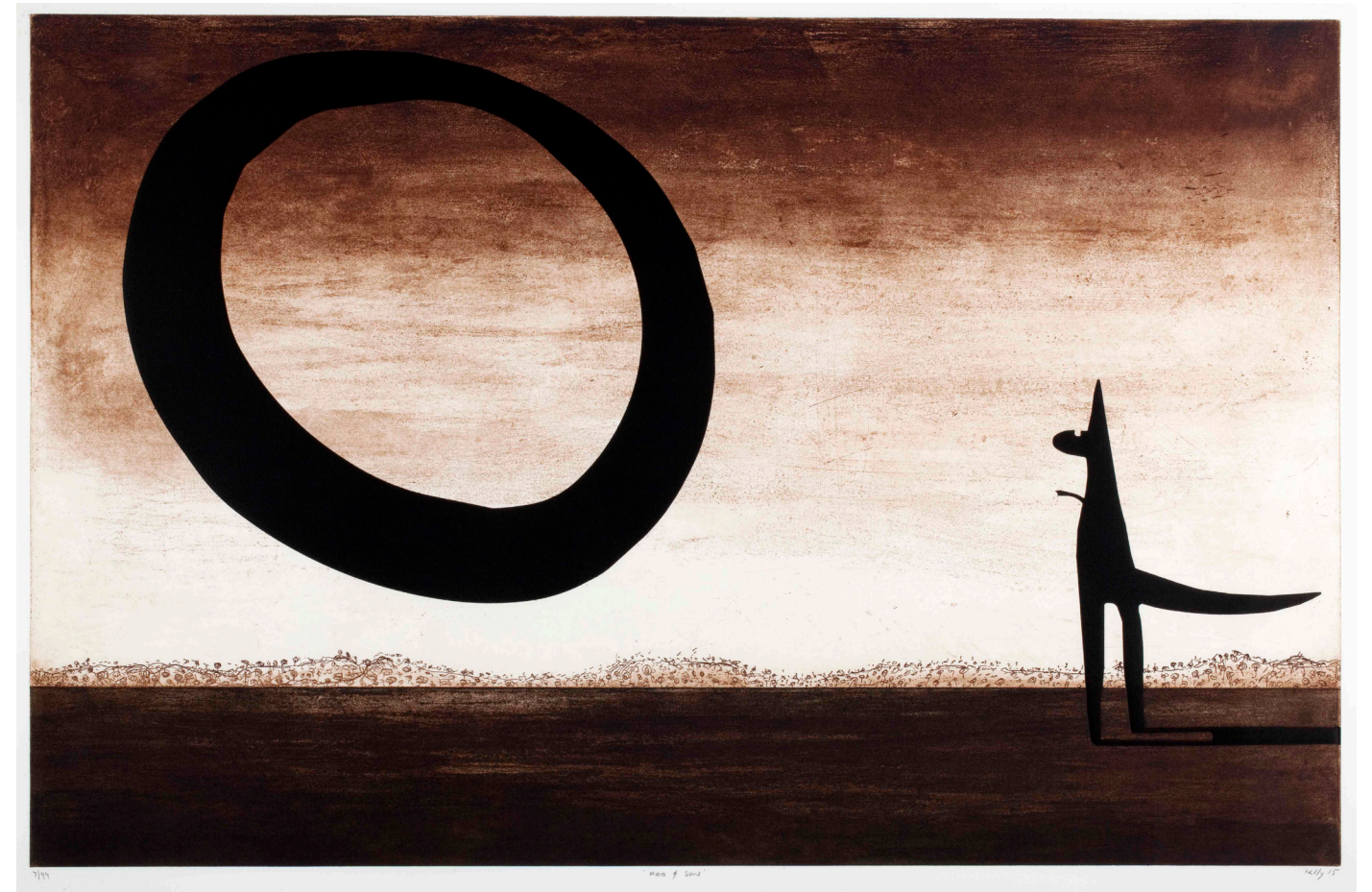


teeth as they composed patient, deadpan replies to each of his letters, hoping that he would eventually give up the battle. Instead, Kelly opened a new line of attack, writing to Senator Rod Kemp, Federal Minister for the Arts and Sport. On 12 March this elicited another patient, non-committal reply from the Minister's Office.

To Kelly the Minister's letter seemed to pre-empt the unsuccessful outcome of his latest appeal to the Australia Council. He felt aggrieved that the Council must have told the Minister's Office what they were intending before informing the artist. When he complained about this to the Australia Council the response was a reminder that the Council enjoyed an arm's-length relationship to the Ministry, which could not and did not seek to influence its decisions in any way.

Kelly kept probing, and eventually received a letter from the CEO of the Australia Council, Jennifer Bott, stating: "...the conclusions you draw are incorrect" (18 April). This prompted another letter to the Minister, in which Kelly complained about Bott's "blunt refusal" to deal with his concerns. This drew the predictable response that the Minister is not empowered to meddle in Australia Council decisions.

Kelly's final letter to Jennifer Bott, dated 23 September, features his first foray into verse, as he arranges comments from his Australia Council correspondence into stanzas, creating this poem:



John Kelly: *Roo & Sun*, 2015, etching

Out of Time

'...you are not hindered in any way,
there is a separate allocation...'
'There is no separate allocation...'
'...this advice was not incorrect or misleading.'
'...the only Out of Time application received'
'In this highly competitive context...'
'...competitive in the wider context of the category...'
'...our process was not explained clearly or completely...'
'would have set a precedent...'
'...and have unreasonable implications..'
'I sincerely regret this underlying assumption
had not been explained satisfactorily...'
'...communication with you should have been more efficient.'
'...conclusions you draw are incorrect...'
'There is no specific reason...'
'The Board has the power...'
'If we had time we could discuss these matters,
however I regret that this is not possible...'
'As nothing further can be gained by continuing this
correspondence
...the matter is now closed.'
'...Out of time...'



John Kelly: *Big Foot*, 2016, etching

Underneath the poem Kelly placed the Australia Council logo.

His Acquittal Report for the \$5,000 grant, written that same month, read like an extended criticism of Australia Council policy and processes.

Branding the Arts

FEELING BRUISED from his encounter with an impregnable bureaucracy, Kelly became a dedicated student of the Australia Council's activities and public pronouncements. He noted that the Council had grown less concerned with helping individual creators, and become preoccupied with Big Picture policy issues. Of special interest was the report *Australians and the Arts*, commissioned by the Australia Council from advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi at a reputed cost of \$300,000.

Returning to the medium of verse, he constructed a found poem from Jennifer Bott's speech notes for the launch of the report on 21 June 2000. Under the pseudonym Ern Malley, Kelly sent it to every Australia Council operative he could locate. It read:



The Value of the Arts (Stories We Tell)

a seminal report
outside perspective
a different view of the brand
line in the sand

written in a language
only we understand
we will
re-brand

to add value
the arts
help children
achieve more in math and reading
confirmed

the arts sector
like tourism and wine
target
the Disinclined

creative expression
what does
this mean
in the end
why does it matter
my pleasure to introduce
the author
Mr
Strategic Planner
Saatchi and Saatchi



John Kelly: *Big Foot*, 2016, etching

The most telling response was from one employee who got into the poetic swing, and wrote:

Fuckhead:
don't send me this trash –
It's not clever

It was the first truly intemperate reply Kelly had elicited, even allowing for the strained nature of his long-running correspondence.

In response to a letter Kelly sent to the Prime Minister's department querying whether the Saatchi and Saatchi report was a viable use of taxpayers' money, Jennifer Bott sent the artist a copy of *Australians and the Arts*. On 13 March 2003 he wrote to Bott again, asking if 'branding the arts' (a phrase found in the report) was an important strategy of the Australia Council.

The report had sent Kelly off on a new path. He became fascinated by the idea of 'branding', and the implications of applying this strategy to the arts. No longer bothering with the Australia Council any more, on 16 June 2003 he addressed his correspondence directly to the office of the Prime Minister, John Howard. He had no expectation that he would influence government policy, or even receive a meaningful reply, but it was satisfying to put his thoughts on the official record and create a new source of irritation for his antagonists in the Australia Council, who would probably be contacted by the person tasked with replying to his letter.

Noting that Jennifer Bott had declared an intention to "re-brand" the arts in Australia, he presented his own critique of branding.

Australian art has never before pursued a general brand image for what I would have thought were obvious reasons. 'Branding' is about homogeneity and conformity, and therefore I object to the concept of 'Branding the Arts'. It is entirely at odds with our rich, diverse heritage and artistic culture. It raises the question: What will happen to all the art that does not fit the image of the new brand?

He went on to quote Kevin Roberts, worldwide CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi, who had recently stated that "The word 'Brand' has become virtually meaningless."

Roberts described brand management as:

a 'wannabee' science that never was and never will be. It's made up of definitions and charts; an obsession with metrics; researching to cover its ass instead of dreaming to innovate. Research vampires are running amok – they're like Descartes on acid... Brands have been strangled by too much information, explanation and analysis. Their special friends, the research vampires, try to measure and manage emotion and behaviour with proprietary tools, programmes, matrices, hi tech vocabulary. The fools.

This was a devastating portrayal of branding from the head of a company that had just compiled a report of 450 pages of text, with more than 150 graphs and charts, which – as Kelly noted – may be summarised in seven words: “...some Australians love the arts, others don’t...”

Within those 450 pages of text, Kelly found the Australia Council being advised to “make every effort to demystify the arts.” Once again this jars with the views of Roberts, who said: “When nothing is sacred there is no mystery. And without mystery you are close, very close to end game. To misery.”

Kelly sent a copy of his letters to Roberts and received the emailed reply: “John, Ballsy letter. Great poetic re-edit!”

Kelly continued to write to the Prime Minister, in an increasingly jocular tone, discussing branding in relation to the invasion of Iraq and the Nazi era. However, the frivolous comments included one point that is worth reiterating. In the report, Saatchi and Saatchi admit “there is no accepted definition of what ‘the arts’ actually stands for. For the purposes of their research they allowed the term to signify ‘whatever’ their participant wanted it to be.”

It would have been a great philosophical achievement for the author of the report, Paul Costantoura, to come up with a hard-and-fast definition of ‘the arts’. By not even venturing a working definition he has allowed for a disturbing degree of vagueness, regardless of all those quasi-scientific



John Kelly: *Bubbles*, 2005, oil on canvas

graphs and charts. On page 33 we read: “The question of the definition of the arts is a critical issue.” By page 90 story has changed: “From the perspective of philosophical, academic debate, there may be no need to be definitive about what constitutes the arts as long as no action follows such debate...”

The underlying problem lies not so much with the author, but with the nature of his task. ‘The arts’ is not an entity that can be measured and codified, as one might chart the consumption of a soft drink or a breakfast cereal. It is a many-headed monster – “an undefined grouping” – that demands a qualitative, not merely a quantitative response. It is the ultimate proof of Roberts’ warnings regarding attempts to measure and manage emotion and behaviour:

The art that succumbs meekly to measurement and management is not worthy of the name. Do we judge a superhero movie to be more valuable than a play by Shakespeare because it attracts a bigger box office? Is there no essential difference between a pop video and a chamber music recital? In the rush to accumulate data the report tends to ignore the glaring differences in the way culture is consumed. By placing so many diverse activities under the banner of “the arts,” it makes a mockery of the differences between audiences.

As it happened, the Saatchi and Saatchi report was merely the first step in the Australia Council’s larger strategy, *Promoting the Value of the Arts*



John Kelly: *Bubbles*, 2015, etching

(PVA). A report of November 2002 details the results of a series of State and Territory Roundtables, held between October 2000 and September 2001. During this period the Council “consulted with over 600 individuals from the arts, business, government, education, media and other sectors on a series of roundtable discussions about promoting the value of the arts.”

Regional discussions were held in places such as Bunbury, Orange, Bendigo and Rockhampton, with specially prepared worksheets, and the participation of 40 facilitators and note-takers. The Outcomes Report is truly depressing to read: page after page of lists and banal suggestions. To illustrate the point, I’ll quote one small extract, from page xii of the Executive Summary:

Engagement:

- Change the means of engagement with the wider community and each other to ensure minimal separation between the arts and “the rest of the community.”
- Bridge the gap between elite and community groups and between arts and entertainment.
- Change perceptions of the arts. Enhance understanding of the arts. Promote the value of the arts.
- Encourage diversity.

- Build connections between different areas.
- Engage those organisations that have previously been uninterested or disinclined.

One could look at any page and find similar, mind-numbing statements. Imagine the organisational effort and expense involved in gathering 600 people and 40 facilitators, from all over Australia, to compile wish-lists of good ideas. “Encourage diversity,” “Build connections” – how are these airy-fairy goals to be achieved?

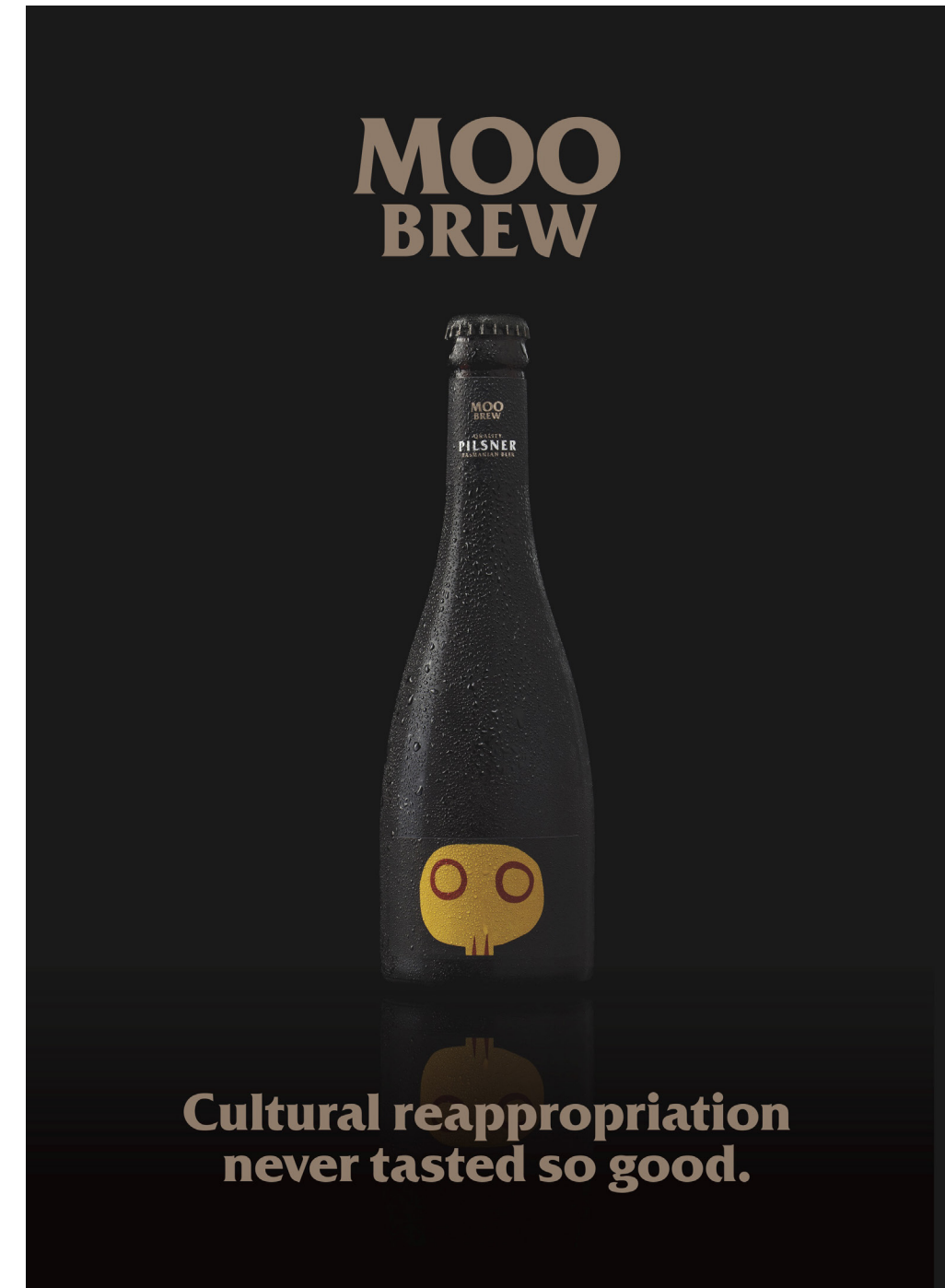
‘Branding the Arts’ was one of four “PVA Focus Areas,” along with ‘Involving the Sector’, ‘Education and the Arts’ and ‘Arts and Media Relations’. A further list of ‘Overall Top Ten Priority Areas’ was compiled from twelve State and Territory Roundtable reports “through a process of ‘broadbanding’ issues, that is, through the grouping of like comments.”

Overall Top Ten Priority Areas

1. Partnerships, collaborations, links, alliances
2. Resources and funding
3. Publicising the arts more effectively: suggested ways to promote; what to promote

4. Arts and media networking and communication
5. Parental involvement / arts and the family
6. Engagement of young people
7. Campaigns: welcome to the arts, marketing, promotions, publicity, communications strategy
8. Community engagement with the arts
9. Addressing social and practical barriers to arts participation
10. About arts product, capacity for arts sector to deliver

It's astonishing to think so much time and money could be spent delivering a list of 'priorities' that any arts bureaucrat might be able to scribble down without any consultation whatsoever. One can only assume that the program built up such momentum that nobody wanted to stand back and admit that this elaborate logistical feat produced almost nothing in the way of useful information. There were no strategies suggested for achieving any of the stated goals. Any fool can see that it would be good to find ways to engage young people, or the wider community, but there is no one-size-fits-all solution to such problems.



Every individual, every community, will have different priorities and different reasons for engaging (or not engaging) with the arts. This is why the arts cannot be branded and sold like Coca-Cola.

Under the heading 'Branding the Arts', the Australia Council website set out to explain this idea in greater detail:

In considering ways to improve the negative associations some Australians make with the two word phrase 'the arts', we are looking at re-positioning the arts. The aim is to improve the overall image of the arts by being recognised (sic) as an inclusive and broad field of endeavour which all Australians can experience regardless of age, location or background. A key aim is to ensure that the entry points to arts experiences are much more obvious and engaging for everyone – this means that individuals clearly understand how you move from amateur to professional arts much the same as we understand the paths from amateur sports to professional sports participation.

In order to overcome the negative associations that 'the arts' conjure up in the minds of "some Australians" it seems the Council would like to convince us that art is just the same as sport. If 'the arts' were re-branded in such a way that they more closely resembled sport, then perhaps they might enjoy a similar popularity. One imagines the MCG packed out for a performance by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, or average Australians sitting glued

to the TV watching a broadcast of the Ring Cycle, just as they do for a test match.

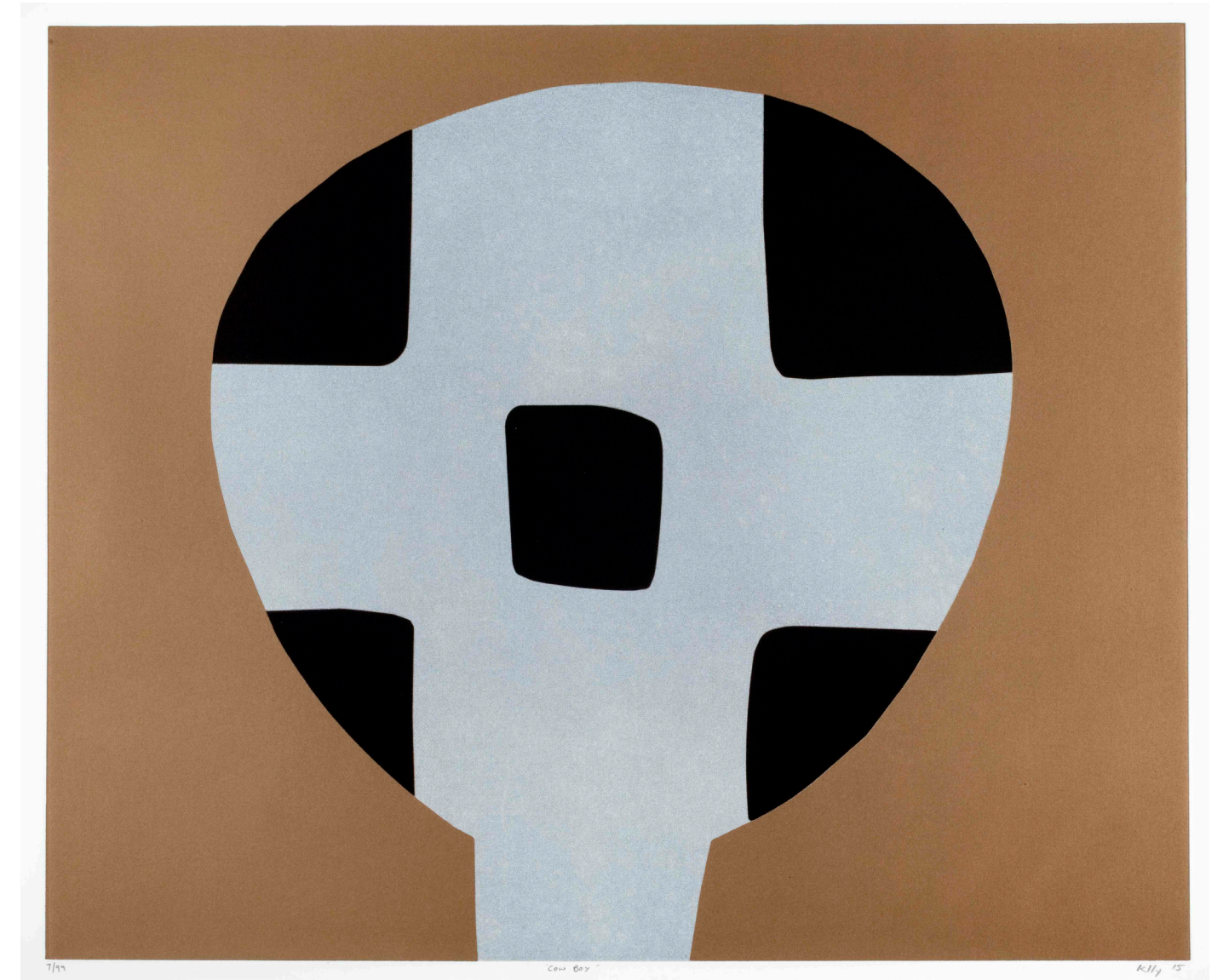
If art were marketed as if it were sport, surely this would entail a heavy involvement in gambling, because this is one of the major ways that Australians engage with sporting contests. At present the only arts event that allows the public to take a punt is the annual Archibald Prize for portraiture. This is because there is almost always a clear winner. With most arts activities there is no competition, which rather spoils the analogy with sport. It's not sufficient to show how one may move from amateur to professional if there are no winners and losers. The Council seems to believe that people with no interest in the arts might take up artistic activities if they there was a viable income involved, but the large pay packets of professional sportsmen are due to the size of the audiences that watch them perform. To make an arts career financially plausible, one would first have to build a mass audience.

Every emerging social tendency is taking us further away from the fantasy that art could be just like sport. While sport saturates the media, the arts are becoming increasingly marginalised. There is a perception that the arts are an elite pursuit, obscure and difficult for the uninitiated. This is almost certainly true, because anything of genuine artistic value entails a degree of difficulty. The more accessible the 'art', the more shallow and empty it is. If sport is an elite pursuit for a small group of athletes, it is broadly populist in the way it addresses an audience. There is a populist side to the arts, but it excludes almost everything traditionally associated with the term. Pop

music may be popular by definition, but it is classical music that remains the standard of 'artistic' achievement. A nation that ceased to support classical music and opera, because these forms were not as popular or as profitable as pop, would abnegate any claims to artistic excellence. The arts require standards of value, even if many people have no interest in anything but the lowest forms of entertainment. If we don't believe in such standards, we don't believe in culture *per se*, and this would make it hard for the Australia Council to justify its existence.

If any of the Council's airy prescriptions for re-branding the arts had been followed it would have almost certainly have led to a significant 'dumbing down'. This was never likely because the PVA strategy was nothing more than a bureaucratic fever dream – a grandiose exercise in the collection of useless data. It demonstrated, in startling fashion, that the organisation entrusted with the welfare of the arts in Australia, had no understanding of the nature of art.

As a dogged John Kelly read his way through a mountain of official reports, speeches and website material, he became increasingly incensed at the waste of resources, and indulgence in "management speak." He had already undertaken a voluminous correspondence with the Council. He had written to the Arts Minister and the Prime Minister. He had turned Council pronouncements into poems, highlighting the contradictions of the Australians and the Arts report.



John Kelly: *Cow Boy*, etching

Multinational corporations are not satisfied to take your money, they want your soul. This is not mere hyperbole, we have it from the marketing director of Starbucks that the company is not simply trying to sell you a coffee, it directs its efforts towards “finding a connection with your soul.” (153)

If there is a haven in this Mephistophelian world of brands, logos, celebrities and commodity fetishism, it must surely be found in the Arts – a term that includes visual art, literature, music and performance. It’s a category that can be expanded to include a wide range of other activities such as the cinema, video games, perhaps even cooking or gardening or various kinds of sport. One could say that anything we pursue for pleasure not profit, in search of sensory or intellectual stimulation, could be put under the Arts umbrella.

On the other hand, there is a certain élitism that underpins our understanding of the term. We might view a movie by Fellini or Bergman as a work of art but find it hard to extend the same courtesy to the latest big-budget action flick. This is where we start to make distinctions between so-called ‘high’ culture and ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture. There is also a tendency to distinguish between arts and entertainment, although not in the pages of major newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which lumps everything into the “entertainment” section.

It is ultimately a futile exercise to say something is art, and something else is not, as the boundaries are too vague and subjective. There is only good

and bad art, and to distinguish between the two is the crucial act of discrimination upon which all art appreciation is founded. It’s easy enough to say “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it,” but such instinctive value judgements require arguments if they are to be shared.

John McDonald, 2016



The MOO BREW Labels