

CIRCA-ISH 2

John Kelly on Official Oz Art

**DAILY
REVIEW**





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An Open Letter to the Prime Minister re: Australians and the Arts

Dear Prime Minister,

‘Branding the Arts’ was one of the key strategies developed from *Australians and the Arts*, a report by the British advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, commissioned on behalf of the Australia Council. In your speech to launch the report, you expressed the expectation it would, ‘...mould the presentation of the Arts, the content of what is produced, the way it is communicated...’ The report helpfully advised: ‘The arts sector might well take a leaf out of the modern Australian cookbook.’

Ms Jennifer Bott, C.E.O of the Australia Council, described ‘*Australians and the Arts*’ as a ‘seminal report’ and a ‘line in the sand’, before declaring that the Australia Council would ‘re-brand’. It set about ‘...measuring the ‘value of the Arts’ and developing strategies to promote this value’, describing these twin tasks as ‘demanding, though not impossible’.

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

I am not alone in questioning ‘branding’ and the methodology

of the research report undertaken by Saatchi & Saatchi. Mr Kevin Roberts is a name that may be familiar to you. Since 1997 Mr Roberts has been the worldwide C.E.O. of Saatchi & Saatchi. He has strong views on ‘branding’ and he is an expert in the field. He has stated: ‘The word ‘brand’ has become virtually meaningless’. Roberts describes ‘brand management’ as ‘a ‘wannabe’ science ... researching to cover its ass instead of dreaming to innovate. Research vampires are running amok – they’re like Descartes on acid.’

Australians and the Arts was supposedly a ‘quantitative and qualitative’ research report that was unable to define exactly what or who the Arts were: there was little, if any, agreement about what exactly ‘the Arts’ comprised. However, it is possible to summarise the \$300,000 report in seven words: ‘...some Australians love the arts, others don’t...’

Incredibly the Saatchi report advised the Australia Council to ‘Make every effort to demystify the arts’. Art is a beautiful mystery! What would the Mona Lisa be without that mysterious smile? Art evolves, grows, changes, surprises, subverts and challenges. It is by nature rebellious of ‘branding’ and categorisation. Again Kevin Roberts’ views clash with his company’s report, for he says ‘When nothing is sacred there is no mystery. And without mystery you are close, very close, to the end game. To misery.’



Three years of art resources have been wasted on this report and subsequent strategies. This can never be retrieved. If the Australia Council senior management continue on this path they risk being ‘branded’ fools themselves!

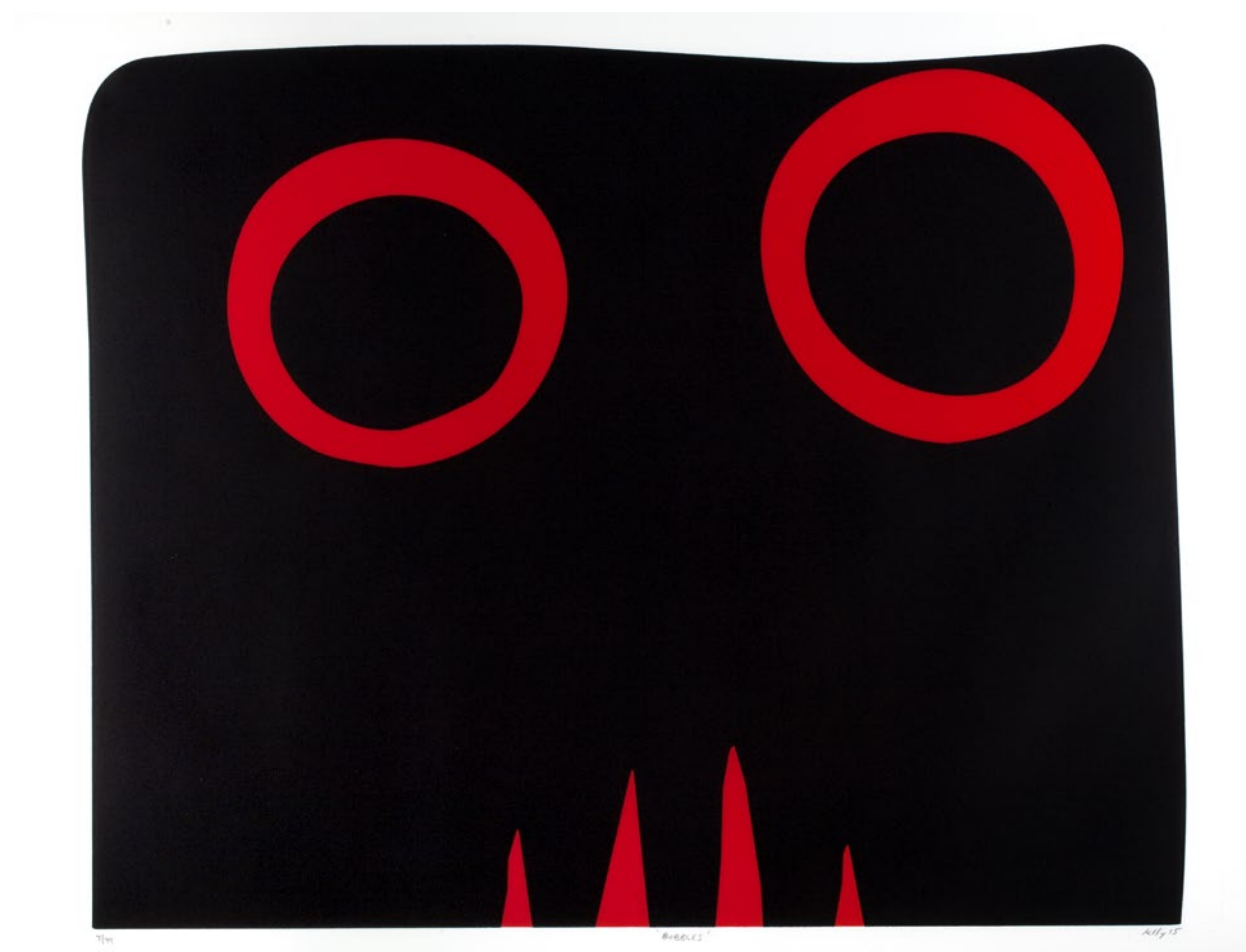
So this is a plea for diversity, against the out-of-date ‘branding’ concept with its attentive bureaucratic hegemony that decides whether art fits its arbitrary mould and is good enough to display the official Australian art logo. From my experience with how the Arts are successfully promoted in other countries, there are a number of practical alternatives to ‘Branding the Arts’ and I’d be more than willing to share them with you or your colleagues.

Finally, after much reading, I found something within the report that might explain the bizarre cookbook quote at the beginning of this letter: ‘...to promote the value of the arts to all Australians will have the associated benefit of helping to bake ‘new audience cakes’.’ Indeed something is cooking in the Australian Arts, but before it becomes a ‘bland brand’ meal I think the chef should be replaced.

John Kelly
c/- The Piccadilly Gallery, London

The following Found Poems selectively choose passages from the artist John Kelly's correspondence with the Arts Council and other government departments, which offer a perspective on the subtext of bureaucratic discourse. Others are constructed using text from published speeches and reports.

Any incorrect spelling is as it appeared.



John Kelly: *Bubbles*, 2015, etching, 600 x 755mm

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 nor misleading
communication with you should have been more efficient.
the only Out of Time application received.
In this highly competitive context
competitive in the wider context of the category
decisions are made in competition against all the applications.
our process was not explained clearly or completely
significant impact
would have set a precedent
and have unreasonable implications
I sincerely regret this underlying assumption had not been explained
satisfactorily this is
for several reasons
There is no specific reason
The Board has the power
please do not hesitate to contact
thank you for your recent email
unfortunately the conclusions you draw
are incorrect
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



This article has a lot of problems with images – the originals are no longer on the Circa site, and they would require permission anyway.

The Time Lord – 25 April 2009

John Kelly goes back to the future at the *Venice Biennale*

Entering the TARDIS

(“an acronym for Time And Relative Dimension(s) In Space”¹), I go walkabout within the monolith that contains *The Meaning of Life*². I race across time eating *Mad Max*’s dust as he tears across the Australian desert, his speed revealed in the same way as Major Steve Austin’s was in *The Six Million Dollar Man*.³ The bionic Major could run so fast that in the 1970s the only way to

reveal the pace of his motion was to show it slowly, a paradox that still bemuses me today. The TARDIS shudders as we leap the 30 years into the future and land at the 2009 Australian *Venice Biennale* pavilion where we meet Dr Blair French, who is describing in high definition a “major” exhibition that has not yet happened.

A key scene in this film is when a “helmeted figure in black emerges from inside the moving car through the side window, slowly mounts

the roof... Every nuance of his movement is emphasised in slow-motion, transforming a potentially dangerous act into a formal study in physical virtuosity...”⁴ Outside the pavilion are the stage props, *Mad Max*’s replica car. This ‘Interceptor’ embedded itself in my memory when the film was shot in the bleak town⁵ where I spent my childhood holidays. Like my 1970s memories, a motorbike has crashed into the wall of the pavilion, whilst back inside, the projections “on either side of a suspended screen...

effectively links both levels of the Pavilion... In this context no single work dominates any other, but located as it is at the centre of the Pavilion... Interceptor Surf Sequence will without doubt linger in one’s memory.”⁶

When Australians fly to Venice, we, like Doctor Who, become natural time-travellers for we are always going back in time. Art mediums that are time-based can also manipulate it directionally and, being digital, it means communication can be globally instantaneous. This, however, does not explain the efficiency of the Australia Council for the Arts, who have already published the catalogue essays, acknowledgements and descriptions of site-specific installations six weeks before the *Venice Biennale* has actually opened. It creates a challenge. Can one review an exhibition before it exists? So step into my TARDIS and let’s be “dimensionally transcendental.”⁷ Before we leave it might be worth considering the questions that one should ask the good doctor: can a memory linger, without doubt, before that memory has been experienced in context?

Doctor Who visited Venice where, along with an ‘amphibian gondola’ he “...met a curator obsessed with his art collection and your typical mad cult leader.”⁸ Venice is a city that can be easily stereotyped, as Monty Python did in the 1979 film *Away from it All*, in which John Cleese delivered that memorable line “...not more of those fucking gondolas.”⁹ Australia is a country that can also be cliché-ridden, with imagery being used to simplify the complexity of a continent – stereotypical images that might be viewed as coming from ‘a long time ago on a Sunday far, far away’ and not from the sophisticated cosmopolitan postcolonial Australia of today.

Doug Hall, the Australian commissioner for this year’s

Biennale pavilion, emphasises that Venice is not about cliché, whilst telling us he is aware of ‘cultural diplomacy’. He believes that Australia’s presence in Venice is “...about international representation and not...banal or twee or heavy-handed political gestures.”¹⁰ According to Hall, there were three elements to his role: “...the selection procedure, then fund raising – and that’s about people with interest, influence and money, the ricochet effect beyond the immediate goal. Then there’s the advocacy of Venice: making Australia look very, very good.”¹¹ One might ask how much the second element directly impacted on the first and third?

Shaun Gladwell was selected to represent Australia on the back of his success at the 2007 *Biennale*, where a video work was included in the Robert Storr exhibition, *Think with the senses – feel with the mind*. Storm sequence (2000) was commented upon by Richard Dormont, art critic for the London *Telegraph*, who stated, “If I had to pick the single young artist in this *Biennale* destined for future greatness, it would be the Australian Shaun Gladwell...”¹² Dormont gave no reason for this prediction; however, soon after Venice, the DVD ricocheted into auction and sold for a “blockbuster” \$84,000Aud.¹³

Dormont is not just an art critic, he is an important cultural commentator who writes for the *New York Review of Books*.¹⁴ He is a well-read cultural critic who in 2007 heavily criticised the British *Biennale* representative for being a “phony.”¹⁵ Is Tracey Emin a phony reality-TV artist as Dormont suggests? If she is, Tracey has built a career on this negative criticism that seems to paradoxically add to her ‘success’ as an artist – some might think she welcomes it. Strangely, Emin shares Dormont’s view about Gladwell because as a curator she selected him for her room in last year’s Royal Academy

Summer Exhibition.¹⁶ It begs the question: can you be a phony reality-TV artist at the same time as being a cultural visionary?

Others also knew that Gladwell was destined for great things. “In 2006 he was awarded a two-year Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts Visual Arts Board to research and produce five major works for several international biennales and commissions...”¹⁷ With the help of the Australia Council, *MADDEST MAXIMS* was “begun in earnest in 2007...”¹⁸, a year before he was selected to exhibit this work at Venice. Four other artists were also selected to show in the other space, the Ludoteca. They were Vernon Ah Kee, Ken Yonetani, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro.

If Doctor Who had been in the room of vigorous democratic debate, he would have heard some other ideas put forward by Doug Hall. In February 2008, upon being appointed by the Australia Council as Commissioner for Venice, Hall said that he wanted something that “...didn’t mark Australia as derivative...,” something “...genuinely different...that I think makes it peculiarly Australian.”¹⁹ He was not referring to an actor ‘surfing’ on top of Priscilla, the Queen of the Desert, but his admiration for the indigenous ‘Western Desert’ painting movement. However, he was very quick to point out that “...no decision has been made, and a program of virtuous cultural democracy has yet to run its course.”²⁰ Hall was obviously out-voted, for Western Desert painting was not selected for Venice, unless you regard Gladwell’s images of the landscape around Broken Hill, with its road-kill kangaroos, blue skies and red desert, looking like a typical Aussie beer commercial, as the archetypal, stereotypical, clichéd and barren western desert? I wake in fright in “...the Pavilion that is itself treated by the artist as a form of sculptural vessel, conveying a



John Kelly: Big Foot, 2005

coherent yet vigorously associative expression of a place a world removed from the Giardini.”²¹

All that is missing from Gladwell’s imagery is a large monolith and some token Aboriginals with a spear and shield; however, the latter is represented through Vernon Ah Kee. Ah Kee rises from the pages of *The Australian* to create an interesting debate with his ‘Commissioner’:

“The problem with art produced and retailed through art centres – if you want to call it art – is that the artists don’t understand their role ... I’m talking about the narrow definition of Aboriginal art that the people in remote communities live up to, to their own detriment.”²² The article suggested that Ah Kee believes “... it’s important for Aboriginal artists to understand that art in Western culture is a commodity, and the art

market an industry that runs like a well-oiled machine. The artist’s role is to work within that system to create exceptional art.”²³ “Ah Kee will be showing a video in which an Aboriginal surfer appears like a new-age warrior, skimming the waves on a board transformed into a weapon, with the bright markings of a shield from the rainforest region of north Queensland.”²⁴

Sitting in the catalogue between Ah Kee, an aboriginal artist with Chinese heritage, and Ken Yonetani, an Australian who recently immigrated from Japan, is Felicity Fenner’s essay, where she tells us “...a politically-led reassessment of Australia’s place in the world has resulted in a surge of interest...in Aboriginal art, and a new Australian preparedness to engage with the cultures of neighbouring Asian

and Pacific nations.”²⁵ What was Doug Hall saying about cultural diplomacy and heavy-handed political messages? It reminds me of some graffiti I once saw about a gay whale demanding land rights! With the selection of work that has “... a ‘brand personality’ that has characteristically Australian qualities of being down-to-earth and accessible”²⁶, all we need is an environmental message about the Great Barrier Reef, and Ken Yonetani delivers it.

“Sweet Barrier Reef is an installation about coral bleaching, made from white sugar and inspired by the form of a Japanese Zen garden. A symbol of colonisation and modernisation, sugar also represents human desire and consumption, both of which

fuel the industries impacting disastrously on fragile ocean environments.”²⁷

This large, dainty and pretty-looking sculpture is 12 metres long, so to remind you to look hard at the detail, a close-up photo in the catalogue reveals the obvious genitalia references. I can only assume that the work matches the recently introduced genitalia protocols laid down by the Australia Council! Before I am bleached upon by an exquisite-looking phallic sugar reef I travel through the website of Imperial slacks, where I see that Sean Cordeiro and Clare Healey participated in an artist-run initiative with Gladwell. Their work, *Life span*, is a:

“...site-specific installation...” that “... gathers the world’s dreams, fears and desires into a neatly ordered stack... There are 195,774 videos in this towering monolith... Collectively the content of this VHS monument ruminates on the human condition, on the meaning of life and on mortality... The juxtaposition between popular videos and the church setting serves to heighten the significance both of the work and of the church... an apt metaphor not only for society’s contrived packaging of experience and emotion, but also for the ultimate transience of life itself.”²⁸

I find my camouflaged TARDIS in the church, underneath this mausoleum of Video Art. I enter and travel along the *Meaning of Life*, picking up one last mint before buying myself a replica ‘interceptor’ from www.madmaxcars.com. I drive recklessly to the British pavilion “a few years from now...,”²⁹ where I am told another Time Lord, Tracey Emin, who is really a Dalek, has refused to give back the space beyond Thunderdome, whilst holding John Cleese captive in a gondola. I tell her that

recording one’s experience of a site-specific installation, before it is installed, is a “contrived packaging of experience and emotion” that becomes a monolithic visual merchandising display for a curatorial little shop of horrors! Tracey turns to me and says in that piercing but well-oiled mechanical scream – “Exterminate, exterminate, exterminate!”

In this episode the artist John Kelly played Doctor Who; see <http://www.johnkellyartist.com>

1. [http://www.acronymfinder.com/Time-And-Relative-Dimension-In-Space-\(Doctor-Who-TV-series\)-\(TARDIS\).html](http://www.acronymfinder.com/Time-And-Relative-Dimension-In-Space-(Doctor-Who-TV-series)-(TARDIS).html)
2. A film by Monty Python
3. A 1970s TV program starring Lee Major
4. Blair French, 09 Artist Booklet, *Venice Biennale*, Australia Council for the Arts; see <http://www.australiavenicebiennale.com.au>. French is Executive Director, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney.
5. Clunes
6. *ibid*
7. http://paratime.ca/v_and_v/tardis.html
8. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stones_of_Venice_\(Doctor_Who_audio\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stones_of_Venice_(Doctor_Who_audio))
9. <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/htmlC/cleesejohn/cleesejohn.htm>
10. <http://www.stagenoise.com/featuresdisplay.php?id=65>
11. *ibid*
12. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3665747/The-best-Venice-for-years.html>
13. <http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,22212428-421,00.html>
14. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=3120
15. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3665748/Its-high-time-Emin-grew-up.html>
16. <http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/print/ra-magazine/summer-2008/tracey-emin-ra-on-curating-gallery-8-of-the-summer-exhibition,183,RAMA.html>
17. http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/the_arts/artists_and_orgs/artists/shaun_gladwell
18. French, op cit
19. <http://www.stagenoise.com/feature/2008/doug-hall-venice-biennale>
20. *ibid*
21. French, op cit
22. <http://www.theaustralian>.

- news.com.au/story/0,25197,23988114-5013571,00.html
23. *ibid*
24. *ibid*
25. <http://www.australiavenicebiennale.com.au/once-removed/about-once-removed>
26. *Australians and the Arts*, a report by Saatchi and Saatchi commissioned by the Australia Council; see www.johnkellyartist.com/documents/mcdonald.pdf
27. 09 Artist Booklet, *Venice Biennale*, Australia Council for the Arts; see <http://www.australiavenicebiennale.com.au>.
28. Felicity Fenner, ‘Once removed’, 09 Artist Booklet, *Venice Biennale*, Australia Council for the Arts; see <http://www.australiavenicebiennale.com.au>.
29. The opening words of *Mad Max 1*

A version of this article first appeared in *Circa* online, 4 May 2009, at <http://circaartmagazine.website/reviews/the-time-lord-25-april-2009/>; reproduced with kind permission.



John Kelly: *Big Foot*, 2016, etching, 585 x 725mm

From: Anna Waldmann <a.waldmann a.waldmann@ozco.gov.au To: 'john kelly' <■■■■@virgin.net>

Cc: Martin Munz m.munz@ozco.gov.au, Linda Goodman l.goodman@ozco.gov.au Date: Tuesday, June 18, 2002 9:04 am Subject: RE: Austrlaia Council Logo

Dear Mr Kelly

Thank you for your message enquiring about the use of the Australia Council logo.

Due to the circumstances of your grant I agree that you may use the Council logo as described in your email below. Sincerely

Anna Waldmann

From: john kelly <■■■■@virgin.net>

To: Anna Waldmann <a.waldmann@ozco.gov.au> Date: Monday, June 17, 2002 9:39 pm Subject: Austrlaia Council Logo

Dear Ms Waldmann

...due to the lengthy process of the appeal and further correspondence concerning the grant it is now too late to include the Australia Council logo on any associated material with the Monte Carlo Festival...

...to acknowledge the Australia Council's support I would like to ask permission to use the logo of the

Australia Council in conjunction with exhibitions in Basel, London and Australia which will be exhibiting and selling my work to help support my Sculptural endeavours...

As I have been advised via e-mail that your office is the appropriate forum to address this concern I bring them to your attention. Could you please inform me asap of your position on the above so that I may equip my grant in the appropriate manner.

Yours sincerely

John Kelly



The beauty of distance

JOHN KELLY

I AM HANDED A FLYER AT THE ENTRANCE GATE to the Venice Biennale. This newspaper introduces the Sydney Biennale as the next exciting stop on the never-ending contemporary art circuit. As I wait for the gate to open I sit and read about its curator, David Elliott, and how the 17th Biennale is titled 'The beauty of distance - songs of survival in a precarious age'. The idea of promoting Sydney a year in advance would seem a natural tie-in but I ponder the cleverness of this marketing that uses young Venetians to promote next year's Biennale before the current Biennale has even opened.

Lost in the Venice Biennale - Translating the Art of Cultural Diplomacy

'You've seen it! You've heard it! And you're still asking questions?', says Goose (Steve Bisley) when introducing Max (Mel Gibson) to the Interceptor, a modified car that stars along with the actors in a trilogy of *Mad Max* films. Thirty years later this car is the fulcrum of Shaun Gladwell's exhibit: a 1:1 replica of the car stands sentinel at the Venice Biennale's Australian pavilion. Translation is an

important theme of this exhibition so before we enter Gladwell's exhibition it is worth stopping off to see the work of Sarah Browne and Gareth Kennedy (KennedyBrowne) in the Irish pavilion.¹

KennedyBrowne have created a fascinating work using Google. They begin by copying a speech and then translating it through dozens of languages before finally bringing it back into English. The original meaning becomes distorted along this journey until it almost resembles a Flann O'Brien story, where accidental associations begin to form, meanings fray and gaps in the information create spaces for the imagination to run riot.

I arrive at the Australian pavilion having already written a 'review' of the presentation six weeks earlier,² which might mean this review is another form of translation, that in part I am reviewing my own review as well as the exhibition. My earlier article was in response to the Australia Council for the Arts publishing, online, the catalogue and curatorial essays months in advance which, along with photographs, described in detail the site-specific exhibitions that had yet to be realised. It set a challenge: if the curators could write intricately about these exhibitions, before they actually existed, could one write a review before seeing them? The answer was yes and I stand by my initial review, however there are further enquiries to pursue.

One meaning of the word translation is '... the movement of a body in a straight line so that every point on the body follows a parallel path and no rotation takes place'.³



Gladwell's video of an endlessly straight desert track might fit this definition of translation but these images are also complemented by what might be considered a series of anti-translations. Spinning, rotating performers are shown on six monitors forming a stack from floor to ceiling, all referencing Gladwell's previous work⁴ of the skateboarder whilst opposite a skull also rotates whilst being filmed, the result being shown live on the screen that sits awkwardly in front of the painting⁵ that is only improved by the videos' necessity for dim light.

The umbrella title, *MADDESTMAXIMUS: Planet & Stars Sequence*, obviously derives its name from the *Mad Max* films that as a whole could be considered a modern translation, or re-interpretation, of various American and 'Spaghetti' Westerns from the mid to late 20th century, where the horses have been mechanised and the modern 'Cowboys and Indians' vernacular takes on decidedly Australian accents. However the linear narrative remains the same. The hero/anti-hero is about to hand in his badge and hang up his gun, when his family is brutally murdered by the outlaws. This forces the hero to pick up his weapons and seek justice – or vengeance, depending on the translation. Gladwell uses Max's translated/replica car to drive his visual investigations into the cultural desert and ends up near Silverton in N.S.W. where another replica Interceptor stands outside the pub as a local tourist attraction and marks the spot where the second and third films in the trilogy were filmed.

Inside the pavilion Gladwell has replaced the Mad Max character with a passenger clad all in black with a full face helmet, like a contemporary Ned Kelly (via Sidney Nolan), an outsider prepared to challenge the authority of nature by performing death-defying stunts that might actually mimic what the Kelly gang and any number of 'Western' heroes did on their horses. However we might also read it as a portrait of an Australian postmodernist artist like Jenny Watson who was quoted as saying: 'The Australian artist of the mid '80s is a sort of Mad Max character, the nomadic warrior alone with him or herself against the Beckett-like dead landscape in a nuclear, post-Capitalist society.'⁶ Then again it could also be simply a mirroring of Stig, the similarly clad character from the UK television program *Top Gear*,⁷ except Stig's leathers and helmet are all in white. Like Gladwell's stunt person, Stig never removes his helmet.

PAGE 10 & TOP: Shaun Gladwell, *Interceptor Surf Sequence*, 2009, production stills. Cinematography: Gotaro Uematsu. Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Photographs by Josh Raymond; CENTRE: Shaun Gladwell, *MADDESTMAXIMUS: Planet & Stars Sequence*, 2009. Installation view, Australian Pavilion, Giardini, 53rd International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Photograph by Josh Raymond; BOTTOM: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Life Span*, 2009, VHS video tapes, 480 x 318 x 524cm. Installation view, The Ludoteca, Castello, 53rd International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy the artists, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney and Gitta Weise Galerie, Berlin. Photograph by Ella Condon.

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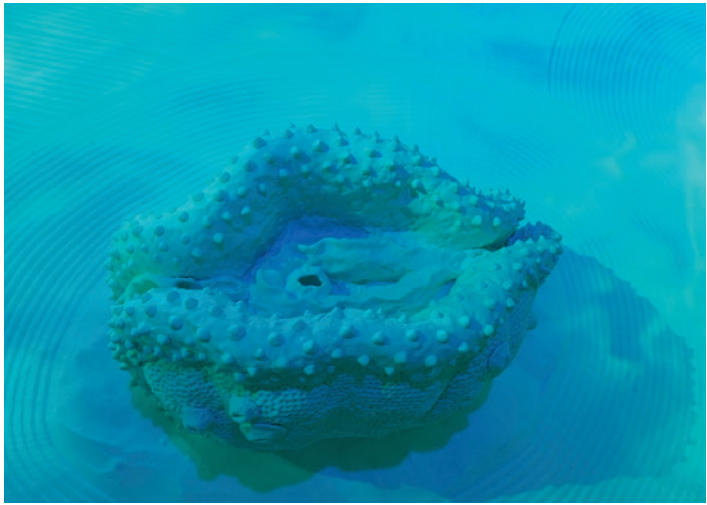


But why would an artist base his art on a car in a set of films whose evolution degrades along a trilogy into a slick, literal update of 1950s cowboys and Indians films, where by the third film the ‘fort’ is encircled by marauding bandits set to steal the ‘black’ gold; a set of films that are based on warped Hollywood translations of historical clashes between the first European/American settlers and an indigenous culture that is usually portrayed as savages? What Gladwell has really done is to create a thirty-year-old trailer, which itself mirrors the meaning of that word in cinema, and tries to extend its franchise from popular culture into contemporary art. It works with all the effectiveness of a V8 Supercar on the Grand Canal in Venice.

Gladwell’s translation of a translation of a translation of a translation gets to a point that information is lost, meanings are distorted and we are left with a space that is the archetypal desert landscape. Here under a blue roof is where our lawman/outlaw (or postmodern artist-cum-black Stig person) slowly forms an erection on top of a slow-motion movie car in the pink glow of a feminine Australian desert. In the next room this figure rides his motorbike into the same desert to tenderly caress dead kangaroos. However, unlike the roos that are decidedly deceased, one would be emphatically wrong to describe the Australian desert landscape as dead or even Beckett-like, for it is in fact a thriving, rich and intricate ecology that has sustained life for thousands of years and where of late a cultural blossoming of Aboriginal art has occurred.

Gladwell’s imagery is in fact part of a larger ‘show’ that has been carefully constructed to reinforce Australian stereotypes and clichés in the official Australian ‘tell’. This is a rehashed narrative that fits within a model of contemporary bureaucratic politics which bookends the so-called John Howard era, where scare tactics frightened a population who has an inherent fear of their perceived isolation. So Australia becomes a fort surrounded by ‘savages’ who want to infiltrate and steal our wealth; a nation where art has become a blunt instrument along with government-backed films that market ‘positive’ messages about a ‘real’ Australia (constructed by great storytellers

TOP LEFT: Vernon Ah Kee, *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)*, 2007-2009, video, painted surfboards and printed text on canvases, dimensions variable. Installation view, The Ludoteca, Castello, 53rd International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Director (video): Suzanne Howard. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery; LEFT: Ken Yonetani, *Sweet Barrier Reef* (detail), 2009, sugar and polystyrene, 370 x 825 x 140cm. Installation view, The Ludoteca, Castello, 53rd International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery. Photographs by Ella Condon.



Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

Colour Country
art from Roper River

Image: Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
Ngak Ngak and the owl at night, 1997
synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Say Speak Tell

Image: Roy Kennedy
Days Gone By, nd
acrylic and pencil on canvas

Exhibition Dates: 5 June - 2 August

Wagga Wagga Art Gallery is located in the Civic Centre, in the heart of the city at the corner of Baylis and Morrow Streets

www.waggaartgallery.org

Wagga Wagga Art Gallery is located in the Civic Centre, in the heart of the city at the corner of Baylis and Morrow Streets

www.waggaartgallery.org

such as Baz Lurhmann); a cultural desert where critical debate is stifled so the arts bureaucracy might prosper, and the art gangs take over the curatorial superhighway.

You might think this is all in my own ‘dreaming’ but the evidence is in the three sideshow installations (comprising *Once Removed*) that accompany the official pavilion. For along with Gladwell’s desert and roo imagery there are exhibits of the Great Barrier Reef made of sugar,⁸ an Aboriginal surfer on his decorated tribal shield,⁹ and a monolith,¹⁰ which just might be an allusion to a large rock in Central Australia! If Tourism Australia had commissioned such tropes, we might be justified in thinking they were trying to sell the international art world an exotic holiday destination. So how did this boatload of clichés coagulate on the shores of the Venice Biennale in 2009? To answer this I need to take you back to a speech by former Prime Minister John Howard in 2001 when he launched ‘Australians and the Arts’, a report by Saatchi and Saatchi.¹¹ Howard spelt it out emphatically when he said he wanted the report and the Australia Council to ‘... mould the presentation of the Arts, the content of what is produced, the way it is communicated ...’ The report also recommended that: ‘Australian Art should have a “brand personality” that has characteristically Australian qualities of being down-to-earth and accessible.’ ‘Branding the Arts’ was a strategy that grew out of this report.

The five artists shown in Venice are all young and have come to maturity or come to Australia¹² under Howard’s cultural policies, and these exhibitions illustrate perfectly the worst aspects of Howard’s expressed desire to place the arts at the service of the Australian Government in the form of ‘Cultural Diplomacy’.¹³ The arts bureaucracy has to justify its place in our economic rationalised world, and the Australia Council has been preoccupied with this fight for more than a decade. They are the fort surrounded by hostile politicians, artists, curators and writers, not to forget the public. They also have over one hundred million in gold!

Doug Hall, Commissioner of the Australian delegation, opened the Gladwell exhibition and it was not surprising to hear him immediately shift the responsibility for all the work to others. Elsewhere he has said; ‘Well, I like the idea of cultural diplomacy ... It’s not about leading the proletariat to a new Utopia. It’s about international representation and not turning it into banal or twee or heavy-handed political gestures.’¹⁴ After his perfunctory speech he handed over to David Elliott who spoke enthusiastically about next year’s Sydney Biennale! So the

opening of the Australian pavilion in Venice immediately became a vehicle for the promotion of Sydney at the expense of the artists standing there like optional extras in a B-grade bureaucratic movie that had already moved on to the next set.

However it was not all bad news. An Australian has thoughtfully and movingly presented a beautiful exhibition at the Biennale. Her name is Fiona Tan but you will not find her work in the Australian pavilion. Upon entering her exhibition in the Dutch pavilion, one can see and feel and then understand ‘the beauty of distance’!

Notes

1. KennedyBrowne use a transcript from a Milton Friedman monologue aired on PBS television, ‘*Free to Choose*, ’ in 1980.
2. <http://artlife.blogspot.com/2009/05/venice-reflux-doctorin-tardis.html>
3. Encarta® World English Dictionary, Microsoft Corporation, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, © 1999.
4. *Storm Sequence*, 2000.
5. *Infinite Pentimento*, 2009, aerosol on board.
6. Adrian Martin, *The Mad Max movies, Australian screen classics*, Currency Press, Sydney, 2003.
7. *Top Gear* is an award-winning BBC car appreciation program.
8. Ken Yonetani’s *Sweet Barrier Reef*, 2009.
9. Vernon Ah Kee’s *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)*, 2007-2009.
10. Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, *Life Span*, 2009.
11. See: http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/arts_sector/reports_and_publications/australians_and_the_arts
12. Ken Yonetani moved to Australia six years ago from Japan.
13. For an interesting read on this subject I recommend the Demos report on cultural diplomacy: <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/culturaldiplomacy>
14. <http://www.stagnoise.com/featuresdisplay.php?id=65>

John Kelly is an Australian, British and Irish artist who lives in Cork, Ireland. See www.johnkellyartist.com

A second translated version of this review, one that has been put through the KennedyBrowne process of translation and titled ‘Is that your dog? – Screams of pain in an uncertain time’ (by Monsieur Jean Kellouseau), can be found at <http://www.recirca.com/articles/2009/jkvenice.shtml>

Framing Conflict: Iraq and Afghanistan
LYNDELL BROWN & CHARLES GREEN

18 July to 13 September 2009

Australian War Memorial official war artists, Lyndell Brown and Charles Green record the activities and experiences of the Australian troops.

An Australian War Memorial Travelling Exhibition. The Australian War Memorial’s Travelling Exhibitions program is funded by the Australian Government’s commemorations program.

Lyndell BROWN and Charles GREEN, *Portrait, Dr Jeff Brock, ANZ surgeon, Kandahar (lower panel)* 2007, oil on linen, 51 x 51cm ANMM ART15312

Joseph Banks and the Flora of the Australian East Coast

25 July to 6 September 2009

Engravings of drawings by Sydney Parkinson, the artist who accompanied Joseph Banks on James Cook’s first Pacific voyage of 1768-71. These works show the diversity of plants collected on the Australian east coast.

John Frederick MILLER, *Banksia spicata* © Natural History Museum, London. ANMM Collection Gift from Dr and Mrs E. Schiller

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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



John Kelly: *Skull / Alien*, 2015, etching, 590 x 755mm



stand in front of Lyndal Jones's exhibition *Aqua Profunda* (*Deep Water*) in the Australian Pavilion. Back then you would have seen a plasma screen showing water lapping at a ferry as it crosses Sydney Harbour, whilst on another screen a *vaporetto* (ferry) heads across the Venetian lagoon. It is not real water but projected digital pixels. It is not even deep; it is a simulacrum. Just as the Gulf 'War' exploded harmless pixels on TV, you could not drown in Jones's work. Now head to 2009 and you will find parked up at the Australian Pavilion Sean Gladwell's exact replica of the car from the *Mad Max* films along with a motorbike. On the wall are videos of Australian desert imagery. *Welcome to the desert of the reel!*

Pictures hanging in a hallway
Or the fragment of a song
Half-remembered names and faces
But to whom do they belong?
When you knew that it was over
Were you suddenly aware
That the autumn leaves were turning
To the color of her hair?

Now go back to 2003 and we see Patricia Piccinini's installation *Game Boys Advanced* and her other disturbingly 'real' hyper-realizations, even though we know the figures are made from

silicone (with human hair). In 2005 you will find Ricky Swallow's table of fish carved so intricately from wood, so life-like, and you marvel at the skill of his knife that has wrapped a skull in a wooden bean-bag. Gladwell, Piccinini, Swallow and Jones all use an exacting reproduction of what we generally accept as reality to express their ideas. Flip along now to 2007 and have a look at Callum Morton's *Valhalla*. In this piece he reproduces an exact replica of his Melbourne home. In 2009 we have Ken Yonetani's *Barrier Reef* replicated in sugar and other digital simulations by Vernon Ah Kee and Susan Norrie. It is a fact that in the last decade of the Venice Biennale every Australian presentation has presented some form of hyper-realism. It could be String theory, or *The Golden Thread*, the title of this year's Venice Biennale exhibition from Australia by Sydney-based Hany Armanious.

A polystyrene box might look like polystyrene but we are told it is not polystyrene. It has another cast object on top of it – it is what it is but it is not. I arrive in Venice in 2011 to find Hany Armanious's work, which involves casting real objects and then exhibiting them. I am told repeatedly at the opening that it is all about the process. According to the exhibition's curator, Anne Ellegood (also Senior Curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles), Armanious often exterminates the original for there is no longer any reason for them to exist. The work is beyond criticism because it deliberately sets out to be so unoriginal that it contains an inherent humour in the dumbness of it (this is not a criticism⁴). It moves effortlessly from Baudrillard to the archetypal cartoon about Modernism, the one that shows a gallery visitor mistaking the fire extinguisher for the artwork. It then moves back to the *Ecclesiastes* which is quoted by Baudrillard at the beginning of his text, 'The Precession of Simulacra':

The simulacrum is never what hides the truth - it is truth that hides the fact that there is none.
The simulacrum is true.

Armanious casts his work in materials that are close to but do not have the essential quality of the original. And 'original' is a good word in this case for one can think of cast beer cans by Jasper Johns or Warhol's Brillo boxes, even Madame Tussauds, to understand that many have played with the idea of the exact reproduction all the way back to Magritte's pipe that wasn't. In contemporary Australian terms take a look at Greg Taylor's cast vaginas, or Ron Mueck who must be odds-on favourite as our next Venice Biennale representative!

Armanious's work is a translation of a pre-existing simulacra (often mass-produced, disposable objects) whilst Jones's digital water and Piccinini's hyper-real figures could also be regarded the same way. Mad Max's car is a simulacrum of a film prop which is in itself a translation (the film is also a simulation of the Western genre). The same for Morton's house, ditto Yonetani's sugary reef, Swallow, et al. I am not suggesting these works are not good, for some are very good. What I am

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The Golden Thread: Hany Armanious at the Venice Biennale

JOHN KELLY

Round like a circle in a spiral
Like a wheel within a wheel
Never ending or beginning on an ever-spinning reel
Like a snowball down a mountain or a carnival balloon
Like a carousel that's turning running rings around the moon
Like a clock whose hands are sweeping past the minutes
on its face
And the world is like an apple whirling silently in space
Like the circles that you find
In the windmills of your mind¹

Jean Baudrillard is dead, so you might have read in the press of 7 March 2007. This may be one reality, however the truth may also be that the French philosopher simply disappeared. Did he choose to slip into a nearby parallel universe? Contemporary physics and M-theory (the 'M' stands for 'Membrane' or 'Mother of all theories') might be able to describe Baudrillard's disappearance. Physics now suggests that there may be more than one universe and that these 'multi' universes coexist with ours in up to eleven different dimensions, with some curled up so small that they may be just millimetres from us; yet we can't see them. Could it be that this radical scientific M-theory (a development of String theory) fits in with Baudrillard's philosophy of *Simulacra and Simulation*² and that if there are other worlds, where carbon copies of ourselves potentially exist, then Baudrillard could still be alive, a clone in another space? Science is looking through the looking glass, back beyond the Big Bang, and seeing that reality is far more fantastic than fiction.

Like a tunnel that you follow to a tunnel of its own
Down a hollow to a cavern where the sun has never shone
Like a door that keeps revolving in a half-forgotten dream
Like the ripples from a pebble someone tosses in a stream
Like the circles that you find
In the windmills of your mind

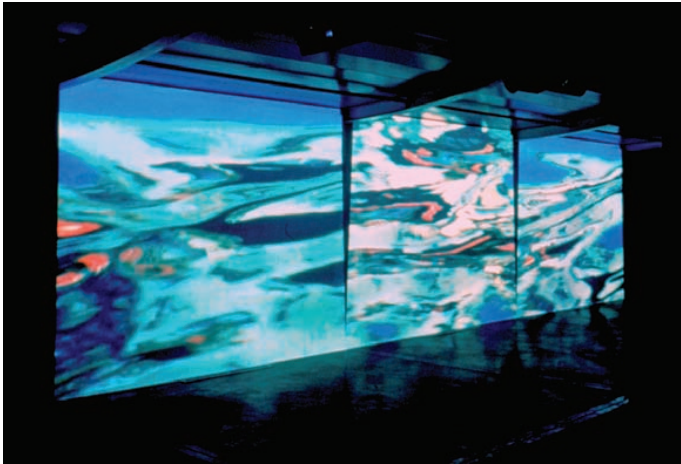
Baudrillard famously wrote three essays during the first Gulf War. The first was titled 'The Gulf War will not take place',

the second was 'The Gulf War is not really taking place', and then 'The Gulf War did not take place'. Much as Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History' thesis was misunderstood, so was Baudrillard. He was attacked for denying a reality that was being beamed live into our lounge rooms – how could he not see it? However, this was his point; we were watching a simulation of a war in the media-world. Even though we were told we were at war in the traditional sense, we weren't. This was in part due to the absence of politics (no cultural ideology was at stake, the Cold War having ended a few years earlier) and that technology allowed the war to be so thoroughly rehearsed in simulated war games that it could be pre-scripted as an all-consuming media event with a foregone conclusion. The Gulf 'War' could therefore be read as a simulacrum, or 'something having merely the appearance of a certain thing without possessing its substance or proper qualities'. In the end America declared victory but Saddam Hussein was not defeated. He remained in power whilst his Revolutionary Guards crushed the internal dissent; 'Shock and Awe' was some time off.³

Keys that jingle in your pocket
Words that jangle in your head
Why did summer go so quickly?
Was it something that I said?

Some scientists believe that if computing power continues to develop at its current speed then sometime soon, rather than just war games, we will be able to develop a complete simulation of life itself. *The Matrix* might not be so far-fetched as first thought. This fits neatly with Baudrillard who states that history is no longer real for at some point human existence escaped from reality and it is our role to try to understand whether we can return to this moment which forever after held that nothing is true. M-theory also allows for the possibility of time travel. Maybe we can go back. Let's try.

There is a parallel world we know and it thrives on artifice. We know it as The Art World. In June 2011 we find it in that most beautiful of simulations, Venice, Italy. Let's go via 2001 and



highlighting is the conceptual repetitiveness of Australia's presentation over the past decade, which raises the question: is there only one art world in Australia? What happened to the others that M-theory suggests should exist?

If Baudrillard were to reappear, he might argue that Hany Armanious actually did not exhibit at the Venice Biennale and that it was in fact himself, Jean Baudrillard, who exhibited in the Australian Pavilion.⁵ He might not be wrong. He could equally argue that the Australian Pavilion, that lies in the shadow of the British and French pavilions, is a presentation that reflects an Australia that is itself a simulation, and this is translated in an apparent obsession Australian artists have had for the past decade – an important and consistent thread. From Baudrillard to M-Theory through to the previous decade of Australian art at the Venice Biennale, what we can establish is that Armanious fits into a defined model or simulation of what Australian art must be in order to be presented in the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. This is the reality of this pavilion. ♡

As the images unwind
Like the circles that you find
In the windmills of your mind

1. Lyrics from *The Windmills of Your Mind (Les moulins de mon cœur)*, a song performed by Noel Harrison with music by Michel LeGrand, and English lyrics by Alan Bergman and Marilyn Bergman from the 1968 film *The Thomas Crown Affair*.
2. Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* was originally published in French in 1981; English translation by Sheila Faria Glaser, The University of Michigan Press, 1994.
3. Regarded as 'the most intense bombardment in history', 'Shock and Awe' was the official name of America's bombing campaign in Baghdad over two days in March 2003.
4. My own work deals with 'Simulacra and Simulation' which is why I am so interested in this subject. I began my Dobell's camouflage cows work during the Gulf War and these were pure simulacra because there are no extant 'originals' and their very existence is open to debate. I acknowledge there is also a dumbness about them. My



recent work also deals with models of museums. I am currently making a sculpture of the Tate Modern from a forty-foot sea container for the Goteborg Biennale in Sweden (10 September to 13 November), inside of which is another set of self-contained exhibitions and references.

5. Australia Council for the Arts CEO Kathy Keele announced in Venice, in tortured bureaucratic speak, plans for a new Australian Pavilion. It would be great if Hany Armanious got to design it!

John Kelly is an Australian, British and Irish artist who lives in Cork, Ireland. He will be represented at this year's Goteborg Biennale in Sweden, 10 September to 13 November.
www.johnkellyartist.com

- P11: 1 + 2/ Hany Armanious, *The Golden Thread*, 2011, installation views, the Australian Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale, 2011.
Images courtesy the artist, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Australia Council for the Arts.
- P12: 1/ Shaun Gladwell, *MADDEST MAX/IMVS*, 2009, detail from installation at the Australian Pavilion for the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009.
Image courtesy the artist and Australia Council for the Arts.
- 2/ Callum Morton, study for *Valhalla*, 2007, Venice Biennale 2007, digital image.
Courtesy the artist, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.
- 2/ P13: 1 + 2/ Lyndal Jones, *Deep water / Aqua Profunda*, 2001 installation view, 49th Venice Biennale, 2001.
Image courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

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Steel Drawing, 2002
Mild steel

From:■■■■■ <■■■■■@ozco.com.au>

To: 'Ern Malley' <ernmalley@hotmail.com> Subject: RE: The Value of the Arts – Ern Malley poetry Date: Wed, 27 Nov 2002 11:03:38 +1000

Hey Cate- is this you dear one? It's adorable!

The above email was received from an Australia Council employee in response to some of the found poetry.



John Kelly: *Roo and Sun*, 2015, etching, 585 x 925mm

Being There Simryn Gill @ the Venice Biennale

JOHN KELLY

... I have a real unease for the way in which things that get recorded then can go on permanently on the internet so nothing can become a memory or a rumour or something that was misheard because everything can be checked and it's the mishearing and misremembering and the way things get described and passed on through description that we lose out on.¹

Simryn Gill in an interview with Michael Brand, Director Art Gallery of New South Wales; transcribed from YouTube, May, 2013.

In the film *Being There* (1979), Peter Sellers played Chance the Gardener. The narrative, based on the (1971) novel by Jerzy Kosiński, explores the space between transmission and reception, that space where meaning is fluid, contingent and, above all, elusive. This space is revealed through the character Chance, a man Louise the Maid describes as 'stuffed with rice pudding between th' ears. Shortchanged by the Lord, and dumb as a jackass'. Chance, purely by chance, becomes Chauncey Gardiner and enters a bastion of influence and power where he is perceived to be a sophisticated seer by the billionaire powerbroker, Benjamin Rand.²

Gardiner's simple utterances on gardening are interpreted as profound political messages and are quoted by the President of the United States. It leads to the gardener or Gardiner being interviewed on a national chat show and, by the end of the narrative, he is being considered as a future President. From our initial perception of the man as a domestic hostage, educated purely by TV, the film concludes with a visual 'allegorical reversal'. Chauncey is shown wandering off through the beautiful garden before walking on water. Chance remains a mystery.

As long as the roots are not severed, all is well. And all will be well in the garden.³

Simryn Gill is also a gardener. In a short interview with Michael Brand, the Director of the Art Gallery of NSW, Gill talks of her arrival in Adelaide, describing it as remote and unfamiliar. In response to her dislocation Gill talks of venturing into the garden, describing her initial desire to make things familiar with both her and her plants struggling to make a connection with their new 'remote' environment, in a country where the concept of a 'native' garden had only recently taken root.



Catherine de Zegher and Simryn Gill, *Here art grows on trees*, Australian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2013; unless otherwise indicated all images this article of work by Simryn Gill; images courtesy the artist; photos: Jenni Carter

For her, 'plants and the plant world offer a powerful way to think about where we find ourselves now and how we grow into and adapt to our sense of place.' In her touching upon the roots of being, the roots of words within symbolic structures that come with language—in the interstices—the drawn-out insects become her allies in the recent large paperwork *Let Go, Let's Go*. Together they possess a threatening semiotic/symbolic mobility, as they fly off the page, off the sheet of paper.⁴

The garden is at the heart of Gill's work presented in Venice's Giardini at this year's Biennale whose overarching theme blurs 'the line between professional artists and amateurs, outsiders and insiders'. The curator Massimiliano Gioni's stance 'takes an anthropological approach to the study of images' and begins with Carl Jung's *The Red Book*.⁵ As we will see Australia's representative, Simryn Gill, also fits Gioni's criteria with uncanny exquisiteness.⁶

Gill uses materials including text, photographs, video and other incidentally found and collected objects, bringing it together to form an ephemeral installation that both references the garden whilst interacting within one. The use of a garden as metaphor is as old as the story of Adam and Eve, and as contemporary as the 2009 Venice Biennale where Roman Ondák ...

... landscaped the interior of the Czech and Slovak pavilion, removing the doors at either end and having the Giardini's gardeners plant trees and shrubs to either side of a path that runs through the building. Ondák has made the inside seamless with the outside, and most visitors walk through oblivious ...⁷



Half Moon Shine, 2013, mild steel, diameter: 158cm

Like Ondák, Gill has opened up the pavilion by partially removing the roof and allowing the garden, via the tree canopy, the chance to re-occupy the space where *Half Moon Bowl* sits on the floor waiting to capture the falling leaves.⁸ This cast-metal bowl, created in Mumbai⁹, will collect rainwater and leaf-litter over the duration of the Biennale.¹⁰

As an artist, Gill, has recently been recognised by many national and international institutions, including the MOMA, the Tate, and the Guggenheim Museum which describes Gill's work as 'modest interventions ... in which the smallest gestures – repeated or expanded – generate resounding statements'.¹¹ However they fail to mention that it is only after institutions have elevated Gill's work do these statements take on their resounding quality. But what are these statements saying and where and who do they come from? Who is Simryn Gill the artist?

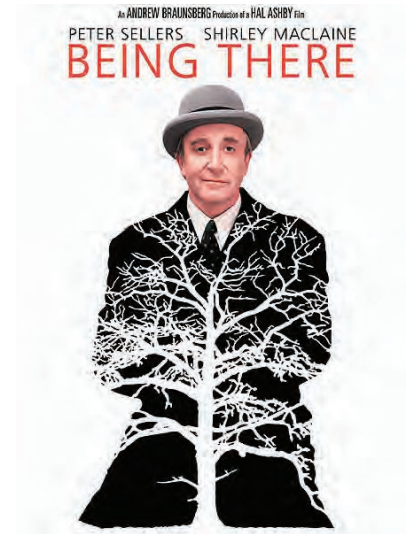
The Tate state that: 'Gill's work questions the coherence of systems that humans create to "know" the world around them ... she encourages the viewer to reject a rigid classification of their surroundings in favour of arrangements which offer uncertainty, disturbance and new possibilities'.¹² These institutions lend a powerful weight to Gill's 'modest interventions', just as Chance's friendship with Rand gives his simple utterings meaning, amongst the elite of Washington. And just as happens to Chauncey, others ascribe meaning to Gill's art, for she is determined not to do so.¹³

Beautifully presented aerial photographs of open cut mines, tinged with a golden light are framed by black India ink on the walls on which the found and collected *Necklaces of Naught* are hung.

Necklaces of Naught made both of organic and synthetic materials, of plastic derived from petrochemicals and of metal from iron ore, close the circle – around and around.¹⁴

The juxtaposition might allow us to think Gill is presenting her environmental concerns. Catherine de Zegher, Gill's curator, seems to think so:

The results of this vast abuse of the earth's gifts are catastrophic, whereas around the globe so much destruction continues to be allowed in the name of economic trade.¹⁵



Promotional image, *Being There* (1979), directed by Hal Ashby

However one can also imagine that these printed photographs could just as easily hang on the walls of our corporate mining giants as symbols of their power and achievement in extracting valuable minerals from the earth. In Malaysia, Gill's work hangs in the Petronas collection and in 2001 she held a solo exhibition in the Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.¹⁶

... with few exceptions, all that come in contact with Chance attribute greater meaning to his pronouncements than they actually warrant.¹⁷

If we want to see how varied the interpretation of Gill's work can be then it is helpful to look back at the piece *1968* (2009), where the audience are invited to make paper origami boats from a 1968 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. One writer, Michael Fitzgerald, alludes to a subtle criticism of Australia's immigration policy,¹⁸ whilst another, Gill's husband, the social anthropologist Souchou Yao, eschews this possibility altogether and associates it with a Chinese mortuary ritual and the European student riots of 1968. He goes on to explain:

One can never be sure if Gill's work is meant to make connections with the events forever associated with 1968. Artists, in any case, would disavow such considered intention in their practices. Nonetheless we take the liberty, in that strange democracy between artists and their audience, between aesthetic objects and their interpretation, to take those bulky volumes and the paper boats made from them as aligned to the students' riots and mass protests.¹⁹

Gill describes herself as a reader who potentially might have been a writer but suggesting she didn't have the discipline, writes instead with 'material and stuff'.²⁰ In Venice this includes books that have been stacked against a wall and where words have been roughly extracted from the text and organised onto panels by Gill and her assistants. In opposition to the slick presentation of the photographs the words have had repetitive childish marks drawn upon them making them look insect-like as they swarm across the wall. This unsophisticated drawing triggers my research on swarm theory:²¹

That's how swarm intelligence works: simple creatures following simple rules, each one acting on local information. No ant sees the big picture.²²



1/ *Let Go, Lets Go*, 2013, collage and ink on 12 paper and wood panels, each 120 x 280cm, 144 books

2/ *Let Go, Lets Go* (detail), 2013



The text is extracted from books often found in Op-shops. In Venice she has used books with titles such as *The Discovery of Animal Behaviour*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, *Australian Nationalism*, *The Road to Gundagai*, and David Malouf's *Antipodes*. She describes the instability of meaning between the books and their individual words best when describing Ross Gibson's new book about Lieutenant William Dawes and his notebooks that record the Eora people's language in early Sydney.²³ She states explicitly that she does not want to 'take sides' but wants to 'occupy' the space in between Dawes and the Eora, where meaning is fluid, contingent and contextual, the very same space that Kosiński places Chance. Between transmission and reception, where in a place like Venice static can collect, such as when your TV reception is out of tune. This can be both meaningless and meaningful.²⁴

As in swarm theory, social interaction is at the heart of Gill's practice. Her photographic flights over the Australian mining landscapes with filmmaker Mary Maguire is one example. Her collaboration with her talented printer, Sandy Barnard, is another. Her trawling through books to cut, erase and redact text with her assistants also tells us it is a sociable studio practice often revolving around domesticity and collaboration.

Next she enlisted her Belgian friend Catherine de Zegher, artistic director of last year's Sydney Biennale, as her curator.²⁵

Gill states:

It's neither possible nor desirable for me to go out and learn every way of doing things from the beginning so the result is that I have found many relationships and ways to work with many different makers, thinkers, fellow artists in arriving at the things I arrive at.²⁶

Gill informed Naomi Cass (Director, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne) that 'her' first photograph was a commission for *Art e3 Text*.

This and other early works were photographed for me.²⁷

And after taking responsibility for the camera herself Gill echoes Chauncey Gardiner's famous line – 'I like to watch' – when describing what she does with the camera.

Yes, the camera in these works is gathering, but I am not sure that the viewfinder is collecting for a purpose so much as simply looking.²⁸

The reversal of the normal practice of the curator selecting the artist may be an anomaly in the the Australia Council system, however, when you add it together with Gill's work, statements and working method, it raises an interesting question: does it reduce Catherine de Zegher's role to simply a friend who adds a possible meaning of the work through an essay?

One key to an ant colony, for example, is that no one's in charge. No generals command ant warriors. No managers boss ant workers. The queen plays no role except to lay eggs. Even with half-a-million ants, a colony functions just fine with no management at all – at least none that we would recognise.²⁹



Naught (detail), 2010, objects in the shape of zeros found on walks, methods of display and dimensions variable



Naught (detail), 2010, objects in the shape of zeros found on walks, methods of display and dimensions variable

Swarm theory is a very good description of how the art world operates and possibly of Gill's own artistic/curatorial practice.

Gill's biographical material is sketchy; articles in the press tell us that Gill only undertook one year of formal art education, but she is far from uneducated. The biographical information that is available points to a privileged, possibly private boarding school education in England,³⁰ and, upon hearing a rumour that she may have studied psychology at a UK university, I approached her to clarify the point. Whilst Gill was keen to correct me on the small amount of time she had spent at art school in Adelaide, she would neither confirm nor deny her psychology studies, asking for it to be left a mystery and leaving the impression she was concerned it might lead to a misunderstanding of her work.³¹ Her strategic presentations and the attention to her persona that extends to a selective releasing of biographical information are too calculated for her art to be simply that of an untrained amateur or outsider.

Among Simryn Gill's multi-disciplinary explorations of identity and belonging, investigations of suburban locations carry a particular resonance due to their often autobiographical nature.³²

Gill's art does not require her to be proficient at any one artistic skill. Her 'talent' is to look and to be looked at. She clicks, hands her 'view' to her assistants to be manipulated. Afterwards she visually arranges an exhibition of collected 'material and stuff' for others to either attach meaning or not. Her art also deliberately blurs the line between the role of the artist and that of the curator.³³ A form of mimicking is taking place. It is a curatorial practice that is in turn collected by major institutions through curators whose core activity, curating, is being elevated to an artform. In the notes

accompanying her exhibition at Melbourne's Heide Museum of Modern Art, it states that some of her art was never intended as art, but ended up being regarded as such, in any case.³⁴ According to Michael Fitzgerald, Gill has described herself as 'mercurial'.³⁵ Souchou Yao describes her as having 'prodigious cunning',³⁶ and ...

.. too confidently brilliant, to have to make these clumsy writerly inferences. Her method is like the unfolding of a fragile, ancient script, leaf by leaf. As we have come to know from her work, say the enigmatic fruit-in-the-face ...³⁷

Her unconfirmed and rumoured psychology training adds to her mystery much like Chauncey's missing history elevates his power in a society that knows everything.³⁸ The mysterious Gill has evolved into an internationally renowned artist, a collector of found objects and curator of exhibitions. Artist, curator and collector, the holy trinity of the art world. As I wander along the canal I see her being interviewed for TV. I stop because 'I like to watch'.

Wandering off through the garden I come to Carl Jung's *Red Book* in the curated section of the Biennale. If we are to question 'the coherence of systems' that have been created, to really know the world around us, to see the big picture, then it is important that we question Gill's biographical details and its influence on her work as it progressed through the institutional system that has elevated her 'mercurial' talent to the point that here in Venice, at least, she is literally walking on water. When we do, we find uncertainty, disturbance and new possibilities.

Life is a state of mind.³⁹

IAN WESTACOTT

INSIDE/OUTSIDE

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1. www.youtube.com/watch?v=L643lPR-La0
2. In the film *Being There*, Benjamin Rand is the chairman of the board of the First American Financial Corporation and advisor to the President.
3. www.imdb.com/title/tt0078841/quotes
4. Catherine de Zegher, *Simryn Gill, Here Art Grows on Trees*, exhibition catalogue, Venice Biennale 2013.
5. www.labiennale.org/en/art/exhibition/55iae
6. Massimiliano Gioni is this 55th Venice Biennale's overall curator however he did not choose Simryn Gill. Gill was the Australian representative chosen by the commissioner, Simon Mordant.
7. www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/jun/09/venice-biennale-elmgreen-dragset
8. Gill's work also has much in common with the work of Ondák, and with a dark garden (*Falling Trees*) in the Finnish Pavilion, by Terike Haapoja. Some of the similarities are quite striking including text dissolving and flying away whilst talking about insects, and a diorama that looks eerily similar to Gill's video piece.
9. I have been unable to find any reference to the maker's identity of this piece in Gill's exhibition.
10. India ink has also been painted on the walls with the intention rain will wash it away, leaving its trace, or stain, within the pavilion.
11. www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/11680
12. www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/level-2-gallery-simryn-gill
13. In conversation with the artist, Gill refused to ascribe any meaning to her work suggesting it was the viewer's responsibility to extract their meaning from it.
14. Catherine de Zegher, catalogue essay, *Here art grows on trees*, 2013.
15. Ibid.
16. In conversation with the artist, Gill had no concerns with her work being collected by Petronas, the Malaysian mining and petrochemical giant.
17. <http://dramatica.com/analysis/being-there>
18. Michael Fitzgerald, 'Against Blankness, The inhabiting spaces of Simryn Gill', *Art Asia Pacific*, No. 82.
19. www.breenspace.com/exhibitions/simryn-gill-paperboats/001.simryn_gill_bs09.jpg.php
20. As quoted from Gill & Brand interview, 2013.
21. A theory that suggests animals like ants 'self organise' without a management structure.
22. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/07/swarms/miller-text/2>
23. See Ross Gibson, *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91*, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2012; Gibson is also one of the writers for Gill's Venice Biennale

- catalogue. Dawes sailed with the First Fleet, befriending an Aboriginal girl, Patyegarang, who he became close to. Dawes became an authority on Aboriginal languages.
24. For instance, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson won a Nobel Prize when they were able to show that a percentage of radio wave static is background radiation left over from the Big Bang. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/dp65co.html>
 25. www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/raising-the-roof-with-a-whisper-20130524-2k5nc.html#ixzz2UOwcJZd6
 26. As quoted from Gill & Brand interview, 2013.
 27. www.ccp.org.au/flash/2009/11/simryn-gill
 28. Ibid.
 29. ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/07/swarms/miller-text
 30. According to her biography attached to the exhibition *Inland*, Gill 'was raised in Port Dickson, Malaysia and educated in Jaipur, India and the United Kingdom'.
 31. Gill told me she was at art school for one year. It has been reported she was at art school for one semester; conversation with the author, 31 May 2013.
 32. <http://artblart.com/tag/simryn-gill-a-long-time-between-drinks>
 33. Curator is an ill-defined term meaning somebody who organises an exhibition but in Australia can also mean a type of gardener who prepares a turf cricket wicket.
 34. <http://artblart.com/tag/simryn-gill/>
 35. www.ccp.org.au/flash/2009/11/simryn-gill
 36. Naomi Cass also uses this term in the 2009 education pack for the exhibition *Inland*. She states: 'Gill can communicate deep and complex ideas, as well as giving pleasure to the viewer through her cunning and skilful work.'
 37. www.heide.com.au/exhibitions/past/decade/2001-2010/exhibition/simryn-gill/edate/2010-04-22/eid/181
 38. Both the CIA and the FBI accuse each other of deliberately destroying Chauncey's files.
 39. In *Being There*, this statement is on Rand's family tomb and read out by the President at his funeral.

Simryn Gill's *Here art grows on trees*, curated by Catherine de Zegher, is showing at the Australian Pavilion, Giardini, 55th Venice Biennale, 1 June to 24 November 2013: <http://venicebiennale.australiacouncil.gov.au>

John Kelly is a Cork-based Australian/Irish/English artist. His solo exhibition *Look and Put (Irish landscapes)* is currently showing at Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney, 29 June to 25 July 2013: liverpoolstgallery.com.au; johnkellyartist.com

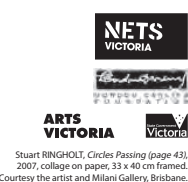


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Stuart RINGHOLT, *Circles Passing* (page 43), 2007, collage on paper, 33 x 40 cm framed. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.



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this mean
in the end
why does it matter[?]

my pleasure to introduce the author
Mr
Strategic Planner Saatchi and Saatchi



John Kelly: *Dark Rainbow*, 2015, etching, 585 x 685mm



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Press preview at the Australia Pavilion for the 56 Venice Biennale 2015. Photo by Awakening/Getty

None so blind

The 2015 *Venice Biennale* and the myopia of Australia's arts leaders

The Australian-born and Ireland-based artist John Kelly in Venice takes a long look at the narrow view of the Australia Council and a coterie of powerful commercial galleries when an artist is chosen to represent Australia at the *Venice Biennale*.

**“Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name.”
– Oscar Wilde**

Here in Venice, the installation *Wrong Way Time* by artist Fiona

Hall has opened in the new Australian pavilion designed by Denton, Corker and Marshall at the *56th Biennale of Art*. The new pavilion appears as a simple monolith looming darkly over the canal at Giardini with the black South Australian granite camouflaging the obligatory white cube inside. It is stunning.

This exciting new building owes its existence to the indefatigable Simon Mordant AM, who has recently vied with David Walsh as the most ‘creative’ man in Australian art. Both men have the ability to raise

multi-million-dollar budgets to build architectural art houses where the public might contemplate the visual.

Whereas Walsh has built an eclectic private museum, the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, and is pleasing himself, Mordant has collaborated with Australia's art institutions, notably the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney where, as with the new Venice pavilion, he gave and raised millions to build it. Since 2012 Mordant has been the official Venice Biennale commissioner, appointed by the Australia Council. Their different approaches may be why Mordant was given a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) whilst Walsh was given a tax audit.

Commissioner Mordant has chosen Fiona Hall AO as Australia's 2015 representative artist. Her work has been described as “characterised by its use of ordinary items and materials, which are transformed into complex and allusive objects.” [1] Hall herself has said her work addresses “global conflict, global finances and the environment.”

It's a fascinating choice given Simon Mordant is a successful globetrotting investment banker providing advice to major corporations and governments. Many of his clients might be responsible for Hall's concerns, but Mordant has said: “I accept that I'm not a curator, not from the art world... So I put together a panel of curators.” [2] According to Mordant, Hall was a unanimous choice.

Fiona Hall's selection as Australia's representative in Venice follows Simryn Gill in 2013 (by Mordant) and Hany Armanious in 2011 by then commissioner Doug Hall who, when opening the exhibition, declared “...when we look at Australia's representation in the pavilion it is impossible to think of the chronicle, and not think about recent Australian art because, we've

never got it wrong.”

Maybe not in Doug's world. However, given all three artists share a distinct and similar working practice and a strong professional connection, it is interesting to ask whether they also are an accurate reflection of this *Wrong Way Time* that Hall feels we are in. So before we enter the new pavilion we might look at and try to understand the economics and environment that have allowed Hall's work to emerge and inhabit this beautiful new exhibition space.

Artists are often accused of repeating themselves and the fact is we do, it's natural. Painters often have different subjects; however, the underlying composition or aesthetic concerns may remain the same, just as a sculptor will often reiterate forms. The same might be said of commercial galleries whose stable of artists may at first appear diverse, but in reality share many aesthetic and conceptual relationships simply because the stable is selected by a singular identity, the gallery owner. In terms of professional connections Hall, Gill and Armanious have, or have in the past, exhibited with Roslyn Oxley9, a commercial gallery run by Roslyn Oxley AO and Tony Oxley AO in Sydney. The artists have not only shared an art-dealer, but also some working methods.

If I quote from the literature on the three artists we are immediately struck by a repetitive pattern; “Hall deliberately transforms ordinary everyday objects to address a range of contemporary issues...” [3] “Armanious creates duplicates of eclectic, everyday objects...” [4] Gill's approach “...to making art involve[s] adapting everyday and found objects...into mordant, yet playful pieces: a Native American (‘Red Indian’) head dress, for instance, fashioned from dried chillies...a suit made from coconut shells...” [5] “Hall's work is enormously popular, partly because of its clever use of everyday

objects, from the sardine cans and camouflage materials to knitted unspooled videotape, old Coca-Cola cans or shredded United States currency.” [6]

If one knits together three quotes about the three different artists an almost unified identity emerges; “...Armanious converts a leaf blower...” “...with cut-up texts shaped to mimic botanical forms like leaves...” “Leaf litter investigates the interrelationships between the natural world and the commercial world.” [7, 8, 9]

In 2013 Catherine de Zegher, the curator of Gill's exhibition, responded to her work by revealing what she believed were their environmental and economic concerns that are also being expressed by Hall. They have other similarities; Gill states: “It's neither possible nor desirable for me to go out and learn every way of doing things from the beginning so the result is that I have found many relationships and ways to work with many different makers, thinkers, fellow artists in arriving at the things I arrive at.” [10] “...Hall is also highly collaborative with people such as her installation team, which includes a cabinet maker, a foundry worker, a retired engineer, a circuitry designer and even a clockmaker...” [11]

No matter how well-intentioned the artist might be, the fashioning of everyday objects into art installations shares a conceptual and aesthetic origin with the department-store visual merchandiser whose job is also to cleverly raise the everyday object from its ordinariness into one that is fetishised and desired, to make familiar things new.

In trying to understand this obsession with the everyday object transformed, it is fascinating to learn that Roslyn Oxley is the daughter of John Robert Walton, founder of the Australian department store Waltons. [12] Oxley also had



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Simon Mordant opens the Australian exhibit at the Venice Biennale yesterday. (Image by allisonzurfluh.com)

a 20-year career as an interior designer and is considered one of the most influential gallery owners in Australia, supporting the cause of contemporary art. Oddly, Oxley was once quoted in 1993 as saying, “Quite frankly, I’d prefer to sell socks” when talking about the difficulty of selling art after the ’80s art boom. [13]

Roslyn and Anthony Oxley “... were awarded medals of the Order of Australia for their service to the visual arts ...for their... support of ...the Venice and Sydney Biennales” [14] In 2009, preceding Hall, Gill and Armanious we find two more Oxley artists in Venice representing Australia, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. Their “...practice often involves the recontextualising of everyday objects.” [15] Oxley has stated: “All our artists are very different.” [16]

This uniformity of selection should raise questions with the guardian of the pavilion, the Australia Council. Strangely it doesn’t, even though the council is charged with supporting and promoting our cultural diversity that has been estimated to include 30,000 practising Australian visual

artists and 500 galleries.

It would seem that the Australia Council and a very small number of contemporary and private commercial galleries have turned a continent’s visual-arts culture into a country the size of Soudan Lane in Paddington where Oxley’s gallery is situated.

Mordant, in his recent National Press Club speech, revealed the *Biennale*’s commercial edge when he said, “...the number of great private collections I’ve seen internationally where I heard the owners say they bought the work of our Australian Venice artist directly as a consequence of discovering them through the Venice exhibition.” Nine Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery artists have represented their country at the *Venice Biennale*, according to the gallery’s website. [16]

Contemporary art is no longer as adversarial as it might have been at the height of modernism, a battle between artists and critics, with museums, galleries and collectors watching from the sidelines. It has evolved into something

altogether different and now has a management structure, one that basically opines: you’re either with us or against us.

This structure has allowed a diverse liberal society like Australia to become culturally myopic when presenting itself internationally. Art criticism is so discouraged that those who challenge this view are not debated in any intellectual way, instead they are efficiently ostracised, often silently, in some subtle and not so subtle ways by the powerful bureaucracy that officiates over contemporary art.

If you want to see this illustrated, take a look at The Art Life’s ‘Power Trip and the 50 most influential people in the art world’ [17] and you will find artists barely rate a mention, art critics even less so. The conformity of thinking is revealed in the unanimous decision to select Hall – surely from the 30,000 artists in Australia there were other contenders?

These powerful managers have reduced Australian art to the everyday object, and it seems we are going to present it until the rest

of the world gets it. Unfortunately they got it well before we did. Koons anyone?

Fiona Hall’s concerns are important, but the local is also global. To her credit, Hall has been outspoken about the abhorrent resettling of remote Aboriginal communities against their will. Hall lived with an Aboriginal community for a fortnight, collaborating with The Tjanpi Desert Weavers’ Project and these works are presented in a corner of *Wrong Way Time*.

While the artist may have genuine concerns, one only has to consider that during the past 18 years no Aboriginal artists have shown in the pavilion, and this is during one of the greatest flowerings of cultural creativity in Australian history. In fact Aboriginal artists have only been represented twice in the official Australian pavilion, in 1990 and 1997, and only in group shows.

Instead we have had art reflecting the aesthetic interests of an influential commercial gallery where The Tjanpi Desert Weavers’ Project would be unlikely to find support, given very few remote Aboriginal artists or communities are represented by Oxley’s gallery.

Hall’s collaborative pieces are some of the best pieces in the exhibition; however, the installation falls flat given that the Aboriginal work is only in the new pavilion under the auspices of a white Australian artist. One is reminded of Richard Bell’s theorem that Aboriginal art – is a white thing! [18]

Hall’s other concerns, global conflicts and the environment, are illustrations of the subject from afar, given her experience of them would seem to come from her engagement with the media rather than any external reality. Hall states, “Any time you look at any media, whether it’s television or newspaper or the radio, you cannot escape this, it’s there.” [19]

The media as muse reminds one that many Australians engage the world through print, radio and TV where simplistic discussion often passes for informed debate. Compared to Ireland’s 2013 Venice representative Richard Mosse ‘s camouflage Congo works, Hall’s take on the subject – the shredded camouflage material transformed – transports my mind to the world of Jean Paul Gaultier, rather than Syria or Afghanistan. The beautiful display cases only reinforce the aesthetics of the department store where valuable things are kept at a distance from the consumer. On the other hand the badly painted clocks are just that, badly painted clocks!

There is hope, however, and it is in the building. Mordant has declared that the new Australian Pavilion is “...a new chapter for Australian design and visual arts internationally.” [20] “We are, after all, there to support the art form.” [21] This new beginning might start by listening to this year’s *Venice Biennale* curator, Okwui Enwezor, who states, “The rampant expansion of museums is not for the public; it’s for the glorification of capital”; he continues, in a nod to the private interests – sponsors, galleries, auction houses – who all have a stake in institutional life, “Do we really need more exhibition space? More programming?”... “We should be asking instead what it means to be a public institution.” [22]

Our public institution, the Australia Council, must reward the incredible generosity of the Mordant family and their tireless efforts to bring others on board to support this magnificent new Venice pavilion by ensuring that the building’s white and pristine interior supports Australia’s diverse creative culture in this bright new future.

The evidence is that of late it hasn’t, quite the opposite. However, that age has now already past and maybe that is what makes Fiona Hall’s work so right for this time. Surely it marks an end to the Oxley9 era,

this *Wrong Way Time* – a great and glorious age when criticism was abandoned in Australia and “we never got it wrong.”

“An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all.” – Oscar Wilde

An Australia Council spokesperson responds to John Kelly’s complaint about the scarcity of Indigenous artists represented at Venice:

“The number of Indigenous artists invited to exhibit at the 2015 *Venice Biennale* is unprecedented, and reflects strong international recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and their work. Indigenous artists represent 50% of the 60+ Australian artists exhibiting in the *Biennale*’s most prestigious exhibitions this year.

This representation includes:

- The work of Daniel Boyd and the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye in the central exhibition *All the World’s Futures* from the *Biennale*’s highly respected Curator, Okwui Enwezor;
- More than 30 Indigenous artists in the exhibition *COUNTRY*, an official collateral exhibition in partnership with the Gervasuti Foundation, curated by Chiara Massini; and
- The work of Reko Rennie in the group exhibition *Personal structures – Time, Space, Existence*, presented by the Global Art Affairs Foundation across two venues.

The following Indigenous artists have exhibited in the Australian Pavilion:

1997 – Emily Kame Kngwarreye,



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Matthew Doyle performing at the opening of the Australian exhibit at Venice yesterday. In background L-R: Australia Council chair Rupert Myer, architect John Denton and Cate Blanchett. (Getty Images)

Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson

1990 – Trevor Nickolls and Rover Thomas

2009 – Vernon Ah Kee was one of three artists in *Once Removed*, the official group exhibition representing Australia at the 53rd *Venice Biennale*, supported by the Australia Council alongside Shaun Gladwell's solo exhibition in the Australian Pavilion.

The 2015 artist representing Australia in the Australian Pavilion is Fiona Hall, and her exhibition includes work from Kuka Iritija (*Animals from Another Time*, 2014), a collaboration between Hall and eleven artists from the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, a collective of Aboriginal women artists known for their works of fibre art created from weaving tjanpi, or grass."

John Kelly responds:

My essay focused on our national pavilion. One of many points I made was that in the last 18 years no Aboriginal artist had exhibited in the pavilion and I would like to add that in its history no Aboriginal artist has ever had a solo exhibition in the pavilion. I felt that Fiona Hall's collaboration fell flat, not because of her personal intentions but because the Tjanpi Desert Weavers were only in the pavilion under the auspices of a white Australian artist who had directed them as to what they might make.

At the opening of the exhibition this week in Venice, Richard Bell, the Aboriginal artist, was making a protest. I approached him and asked his opinion on the collaboration and he concurred it was problematic. An international writer I was with described it as "colonial."

If we look closely at the statistic put forward by the Australia Council, they state that "Indigenous artists represent 50% of the 60+ Australian

artists exhibiting in the *Biennale's* most prestigious exhibitions this year." However, their press release on March 6 acknowledges that "... more than 30 Australian Indigenous artists will present works in the exhibition *COUNTRY*, an official collateral exhibition in partnership with the Gervasuti Foundation, curated by Chiara Massini."

It is important to note that the *Venice Biennale* itself is divided into two distinct operations, one being the national pavilions where the countries select the artist, and the other is an exhibition usually curated by one person. This year it is Okwui Enwezor. He in turn may also select other curators to select artists.

COUNTRY was not an Australia Council initiative. Reading in the Guardian [23] it seems an Italian artist, Giorgia Severi [24] instigated it.

"She has received some sponsorship

from the Gervasuti Foundation, an alternative art platform based at the Venice family cabinet-maker and joinery workshop that will show her work in 2015. The foundation funds experimental projects that aim to preserve cultural memory.

Otherwise, Severi is paying her own way, raising extra funds through crowdsourcing, which she likens to a boomerang: rewarding backers for their involvement and collecting money and feedback for her Indigenous collaborators.

"They need support around the world because horrible things happened and are happening now." Severi is indignant that more is not done for these communities who are losing their land, culture and language. "People in Europe don't know enough about what's going on here."

Given the above I do not think the Australia Council can claim credit for the high number of aboriginal artists in the *Venice Biennale*.

I feel strongly that with this magnificent new pavilion we should make sure that our selection process in the future is equally world-class and should not be repetitive in nature given the diversity in Australian visual arts. If I can use a hypothetical example, if in four consecutive *Biennales* five artists from one Aboriginal community, with similar studio practices and concerns, were exhibited, I would be making the same point.

John Kelly is a painter, sculptor and printmaker Kelly who was raised in Australia and lives in Ireland. In Australia Kelly is best known for his paintings and large sculptures of William Dobell's cows, papier-mâché creations used during WWII in an attempt to confuse enemy aircraft as to the location of the Australian airbases. His sculptures of these cows have been exhibited on the Champs Elysées, Paris,

in *Les Champs de la Sculpture*, 1999, Monte Carlo, in *La Parade des Animaux*, 2002, the MAMAC in France, The Hague, 2007, Glastonbury (2006 and 2007), Cork city 2011, and Melbourne Docklands and Sunshine (2001 to the present).

1. <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/exhibition/461-fiona-hall-force-field/content/01e448c2-5cdc-11e3-a558-00144feabdc0#axzz3XSb9ktJA>
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/01e448c2-5cdc-11e3-a558-00144feabdc0#axzz3XSb9ktJA>
3. <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/fiona-hall>
4. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/new-contemporary-galleries/featured-artists-and-works/hany-armanious/>
5. <http://www.sunilgupta.net/Curating/simryngill.html>
6. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/fiona-hall-unveils-work-for-2015-venice-biennale-20150324-1m6dbi.html#ixzz3VILAXBql>
7. <http://www.designboom.com/art/hany-armanious-australian-pavilion-at-venice-art-biennale-2011/> <http://www.designboom.com/art/hany-armanious-australian-pavilion-at-venice-art-biennale-2011/>
8. <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/53/Perspectives/SimrynGill>
9. <https://nga.gov.au/federation/Detail.cfm?WorkID=26201>
10. <http://dailyreview.com.au/wp-admin/Being%20There.%20Simryn%20Gill.%20John%20Kelly%20Art%20Monthly%20Australia,%20July%202013>
11. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/fiona-hall-unveils-work-for-2015-venice-biennale-20150324-1m6dbi.html>
12. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waltons_%28department_store%29
13. <http://hutam.com/articles/1993/07/oxley-makes-plans-on-fresh-canvas.html>
14. <http://www.artcollector.net.au/Nationalhonoursforthearts>
15. <http://dasplatforms.com/magazines/issue-13/claire-healy-and-sean-cordeiro/>
16. <http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/about/>
17. <http://theartlife.com.au/2014/the-power-trip-2015-the-50-most-powerful-people-in-australian-art/>
18. <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html>
19. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-25/artist-fiona-hall-questions-indigenous-art-future-remote/6345942>
20. <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/media-centre/media-releases/record-number-of-australian-artists-invited-to-present-works-at-the-56th-venice-biennale/>

21. <https://www.ft.com/content/01e448c2-5cdc-11e3-a558-00144feabdc0#axzz3ViZuWajN>
 22. <https://www.ft.com/content/92edf122-e9be-11e4-a687-00144feab7de>
 23. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/australia-culture-blog/2014/aug/27/italian-artist-giorgia-severi-indigenous-voices-venice-biennale>
 24. <http://www.giorgiaseveri.com/>
- A version of this article first appeared in Daily Review, 6 May 2015, at <https://dailyreview.com.au/the-2015-venice-biennale-and-the-myopia-of-australias-arts-leaders/23465/>; reproduced with kind permission.

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

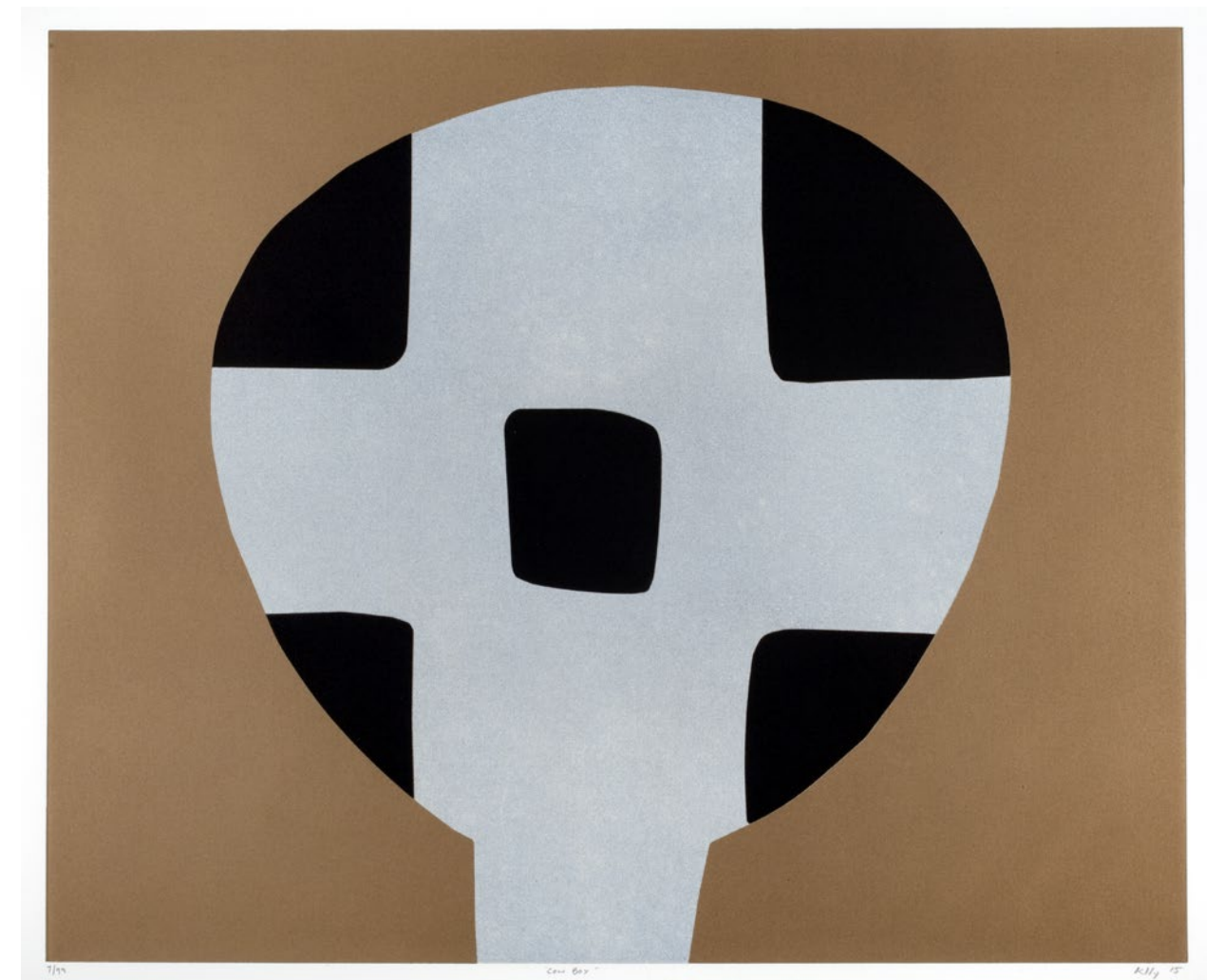
to promote the value of the arts
will have the associated benefit of helping to bake 'new audience cakes'

**THE CENTRAL MESSAGE
FROM SAATCHI & SAATCHI**
is:
some 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.



John Kelly: *Cow Boy*, 2015, etching, 590 x 715mm



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The winner takes it all

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and its 33-year winning streak of artists at the *Venice Biennale*

In the US last year there was widespread consternation

when it was revealed that nearly one third of all museum shows there came from artists represented by just five commercial galleries.

In Australia a similarly small coterie of commercial dealers

and collectors act as cultural gatekeepers for our taxpayer-funded arts institutions. The commercial Sydney gallery Roslyn Oxley9 has during the past 33 years provided a staggering 11 artists from its stable as Australia’s representatives at the Australia Council-funded Australian pavilion at the *Venice Biennale*.

In *Daily Review* last year John Kelly caused a storm when he looked at the small circle who determined the choice of artist as our representative

at the 2015 *Venice Biennale*. Our 2017 choice is no different. While Kelly admires the selection of Tracey Moffatt, he asks in the essay below why, given such a small group of people have influenced our choice of artists for Venice for decades, it has taken them so long to choose an indigenous artist in a solo show as Australia’s representative?

THE WAY THINGS GO, BY JOHN KELLY

Dwyer: You are an expert?

Young: Well I am called that.

Dwyer: You call yourself that, don’t you?

Young: No.

Dwyer: Don’t you call yourself that in the Sydney telephone directory – “Art Expert.”

Young: No, that is by accident ... I personally do not like it.

Dwyer: What don’t you like about art experts?

Young: I don’t like any man that calls himself an expert ... I have moved to have that removed from the telephone book.

Edited extract from the transcripts of the William Dobell trial, 1944

Who do museums ring when they need a contemporary art expert? An artist? A critic? A curator? If recent statistics from the US are to be believed, museums ring a commercial gallery. But not just any commercial gallery. As 2015 drew to a close, Ben Davis of *Artnet* listed the year’s most important essays. At number one was *The Art Newspaper*’s article by Julia Halperin’s that used data analysis provided by Nilkanth Patel to reveal that nearly one third of all museum shows in the USA came from artists represented by just five commercial galleries.

Between 2007 and 2013, 90 percent (or 11 out of 12) major solo exhibitions at New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum featured artists represented by the same five galleries.

It was a revelation to learn how closely museum culture has become entwined with the operations of a few commercial galleries. These galleries covet a museum’s imprimatur because it is good for business.

Back in Australia look at the former Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney) board member Mikala Dwyer’s exhibition at the MCA in November which was complemented by her concurrent commercial exhibition at Sydney

commercial gallery Roslyn Oxley9.

It makes perfect sense and raises no eyebrows even when one is aware that its owner, Roslyn Oxley OAM, was a former member of the MCA’s Director’s Working Circle.

In response to the American statistics Robert Storr, the Dean of the Yale University School of Art, suggests “Museums.. should be looking at a much wider swathe of artists...”

Concurring with this judgement, in May 2015 I argued in *Daily Review* that in the Australian context there had been a repetitiveness and a narrowness in the art selected for the Australian Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale*.

During the period of 2009 – 2015 artists represented by Roslyn Oxley9 had a disproportionate representation in Australia’s Venice pavilion.

This research also led to the discovery that no indigenous artist had ever represented Australia with a solo exhibition in Australia’s 60-year participation, despite the extraordinary cultural contribution of indigenous artists.

This glaring omission was inadvertently brought to the fore by Oxley9 artist Fiona Hall curating a group of Aboriginal artists for her own Venice exhibition in 2015. In a gesture that – to me at least – came across as somewhat colonial, Hall advised them what to make and benefitted from the association, without acknowledging their personal identities in the exhibition (though this was later rectified). The work seemed to be anything but contemporary. The discussion went viral and much debate ensued.

In December 2015 the Australia Council for the Arts announced Tracey Moffatt was to be the 2017 Australian representative. Moffatt is also represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. The 2017 commissioner,

Naomi Milgrom, said in an Australia Council press release:

“Tracey is the first Australian Indigenous artist to present a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale marking this appointment as significant, bold and inspirational. A moment to be celebrated by all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, as it will be by all Australians.”

I am sure we will all welcome the selection of the first indigenous artist to represent Australia. However, we might challenge the idea that this long-overdue selection is a ‘bold’ or ‘inspirational’ one, given it also reflects many years of discriminatory neglect – it might be better described as belated.

Should one celebrate tardiness? It is also noticeable that the indigenous identity is being used to promote the selection, which counters Moffatt’s earlier stance. In the ’90s Moffatt declined to participate in *Who Do You Take Me For?*

Her reasons?

“I have never been a mere social issues type artist, in fact my work has never been BLACK. (If there is such a definition). I have made a point [of] staying out of all black or ‘other’ shows. ... I want to be exhibited in Contemporary Art Spaces and not necessarily always bunched together with other artists who make careers out of ‘finding themselves-looking for their identities.’”

The *Venice Biennale* Australian Pavilion is definitely the new premier contemporary art space for Australian art and Moffatt’s selection is clearly partly based on the artist’s indigenous identity, otherwise why mention it in the press release?

In light of Moffatt’s selection is it possible that a none-too-subtle message is being sent to other

indigenous artists that the raising of social issues might be a hindrance to their selection? For when was the last time we had an artist raise important indigenous social issues in our Venice pavilion?

Quite clearly Moffatt’s work and many other indigenous artists could have been selected for a solo show at any time over the past 30 years but they weren’t – why not?

At the 2015 *Venice Biennale* there seemed to be some consensus that Fiona Hall should also have been selected many years previously. This leads one to ponder the possibility that the selections might be based on historical ‘non-decisions’ and the exhibitions are mere acknowledgements of service – but that hardly fits the definition of a rigorous contemporary art and risks a perpetual time lag.

It could also just be that our institutional selection process is dysfunctional.

Moffatt would have benefited greatly if selected in the ’90s or even in the 2000s alongside her contemporary video artists such as Tacita Dean, Steve McQueen or Sam Taylor Wood, who have gone on to great international success in film. But in 2017, with the prevalence of electronic screen devices and a Shaun Gladwell-like slo-mo on every iPhone, video art is dating extremely quickly.

While wishing Tracey Moffatt well, rather than celebrate our institutional slow motion we might reflect on the processes that have excluded indigenous artists. This echoes another sin of omission. The first Australian female artist to have a solo exhibition at the Australian Pavilion was Jenny Watson in 1993 – 40 years after our first representation there. Watson, coincidentally, is also (and was at the time) represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

Given that Oxley9 artists

statistically appear far more likely to represent Australia (11 gallery artists have been selected for Venice according to the Oxley9 website) than artists from any other gallery it is obvious that it is the most influential gallery in Australia – and has been for the past 33 years.

But this leads to a perplexing puzzle. While Oxley9 has been the most dominant gallery in Australia, no indigenous artists have been selected for a solo exhibition in Venice until now. It raises the question; did it have any influence on the ‘non-selection’ of indigenous artists during the past 30 years?

Halperin’s essay raises the international problem of a shrinking set of influences on public institutions that flies in the face of a culturally diverse 21st-century western culture. The number of visual artists has increased exponentially in the past 16 years but the cultural gatekeepers have shrunk the eye of the needle they must pass through to be considered by institutions and biennale selection committees.

With Moffatt’s 2017 selection, the Oxley9 Gallery (which represents approximately 40 artists), has now represented three out of the past four solo Australian representatives (the fourth artist was also previously represented by Oxley9).

In fact, if you go back to 2003 you will find an Oxley9-associated artist at seven out of the past eight *Venice Biennales* selected by the Australia Council for the Arts, with 2005 the only exception.

By Oxley9’s own figures one in four of its artists have represented Australia at Venice. The estimated 500 commercial galleries and 40,000 artists in Australia suggest that this is an anomaly.

From Halperin’s essay we learn that in the US:

“In the run-up to a major solo

[museum] show, [commercial] galleries often provide curators with access to archival images, pay shipping costs, pre-order hundreds of catalogues and help to finance the opening reception, according to sources. “If a major museum is flirting with a show, we’ll play ball as much as we have to,” says one director of a medium-sized US [commercial] gallery.”

In the US it is causing major concern that its museums would seem to select from just five commercial galleries, but in Australia it would seem to be of no concern that our Venice representative is selected from not much more than one.

Oxley9 can accept the accolades of its successes, and there have been important ones (Jenny Watson for example), but it should also acknowledge that they were in a position of utmost influence when indigenous artist after indigenous artist was not selected during the past 30 years.

In that time Roslyn and husband Tony Oxley have received AO awards for their support of Australian art and that is linked to their support of the *Venice Biennale*. Roslyn Oxley sat on the Venice Commissioners’ Council in 2015 and one of her artist’s stable was Hall, who represented Australia that year at the *Venice Biennale*. Her work was shown in the striking brand new Australian Pavilion. This building was funded by a group of philanthropists who included Simon Mordant, the Australian Venice commissioner (2013 and 2015). He is a collector and is chairman of the MCA in Sydney.

But Oxley9 Gallery did not select Fiona Hall or Tracey Moffatt for Venice, did it?

“Tracey Moffatt was selected by a five-member panel comprising: Naomi Milgrom AO, Australian Commissioner for the Venice

Biennale 2017, Chair of the Selection Advisory Panel; Nicholas Baume, Director and Chief Curator, Public Art Fund, New York; Rebecca Coates, Acting Director, Shepparton Art Museum and independent curator; Lisa Havilah, Director, Carriageworks; and Chris Saines, Director, Queensland Art Gallery I Gallery of Modern Art.”

As a group it takes only Google and a few minutes to see that this group of selectors are intrinsically interlinked.

In the OzCo press release Moffatt tells us a little:

“Naomi Milgrom and the wonderful curator Natalie King and I will indeed enjoy our Venice 2017 journey together and we three will make sure that we keep up the humour.

“But we three are dead serious about art. Naomi with her collecting and commissioning, Natalie who has worked as a curator for more than half her life and as for me, I haven’t really had a life; I’ve only had art.”

(The curator of the Australian Pavilion in Venice, Natalie King, is also the creative associate of Milgrom Foundation’s MPavilion.)

While Milgrom collected, Saines hosted a Tracey Moffatt exhibition in 2014 and the Carriageworks venue in Sydney will exhibit her work in 2016. Before the Shepparton appointment, Rebecca Coates undertook a Ph. D. exploring the history of John Kaldor Art Projects.

Milgrom is married to the collector John Kaldor who was Australian Commissioner in 2005 and 2007. Within Coate’s thesis she quotes from a Baume essay on Kaldor and thanks are given to Milgrom, Kaldor and Baume in the credits.

In her thesis on John Kaldor Art Projects Coate’s spells out how she believes the art world works.

“As part of a globalised contemporary art world, an international group of high-profile collectors of contemporary art also became increasingly visible. While they had similar motivations for collecting as in the past, they forged much closer working relationships with art institutions – from the public art museum, to the international biennale. High profile contemporary collectors and their collections became part of a global network of artists, curators, writers, art museum directors, and other collectors with similar interests. Their increasingly visible role was reflected in their prominence in the equivalent of newspaper ‘society pages’, such as the reviews and updates from global art world events featured in Artforum’s ‘Scene & Herd’. The private collector’s acquisition of key installation works of art museum quality and scale by signature artists within the globalised world denoted a collector’s expertise, insider knowledge and networks.”

Coates goes on:

“...collecting can be an extension of a person’s business, enabling them to connect to new networks of people, and to differentiate themselves. In this case, collectors usually rely on experts to suggest artists, and identify potential works of art.”

This ‘expert’ role in Australia has for many years been played by the Sydney commercial gallery Roslyn Oxley9 who have explored their similar interests with their coterie of collectors. This gallery has been the fulcrum around which Australian contemporary art has been promoted both locally and internationally, attested to by the large number of their artists who are selected

not only for the *Venice Biennale*, but also by the MCA and other important commissions.

The belated selection of Tracey Moffatt, who has at times, along with other indigenous artists, felt it necessary to abjure their identity, highlights not only the gallery's success, but also suggests that its dominance is part of the problem.

However, the responsibility for the non-selection of indigenous artists cannot only be attributed to Roslyn and Tony Oxley, heirs of a retail history who are seen as art experts by a small coterie of collectors. It is also borne by the Australia Council for the Arts which for the past decade has placed the visual arts in the hands of a select few whose main qualification is that they either sell or buy art.

In overseeing this history the Australia Council for the Arts has ignored the tens of thousands of Australian artists who exist outside this nexus. What is transpiring is both troubling and exceedingly problematic.

The Australian Council now need to take responsibility and institute a cultural change. As a great supporter of the Australia Council for the Arts once proclaimed – “It’s time” – they represented all of Australia and devolved the power of selection on a rotating basis to an art institution (whether public or private) in each state.

In this way the selection process would spread across Australia and I suggest they start with Tasmania and move clockwise around the nation so that after 16 years every state and territory will have been able to put forward an artist or artists to represent Australia at the *Venice Biennale*. This would ensure that a diverse and vibrant array of artists could come to the fore with even a surprise or two along the way. It would also allow remote Australian artists a real chance to be selected.

The long lead-time and the rivalry between states and institutions would ensure a highly dynamic and successful set of representations. It would allow for the private galleries and collectors to stay involved but it would mitigate the odds that one commercial or institutional gallery and a small coterie of collectors could dominate the selection process. Imagine in 2019, Australia might even have the odds man himself, David Walsh, as its Venice commissioner.

Dwyer: After your name – after it appears in the telephone book, do these words appear “Art Expert”?

Young: They do.

Dwyer: But you do not like it?

Young: No, I don’t.

Dwyer: ... When did you become an art expert? Was it a sudden transformation or did it take some time? ... Your life’s work was not completely associated with art prior to that was it?

Young: Yes, since about 1918.

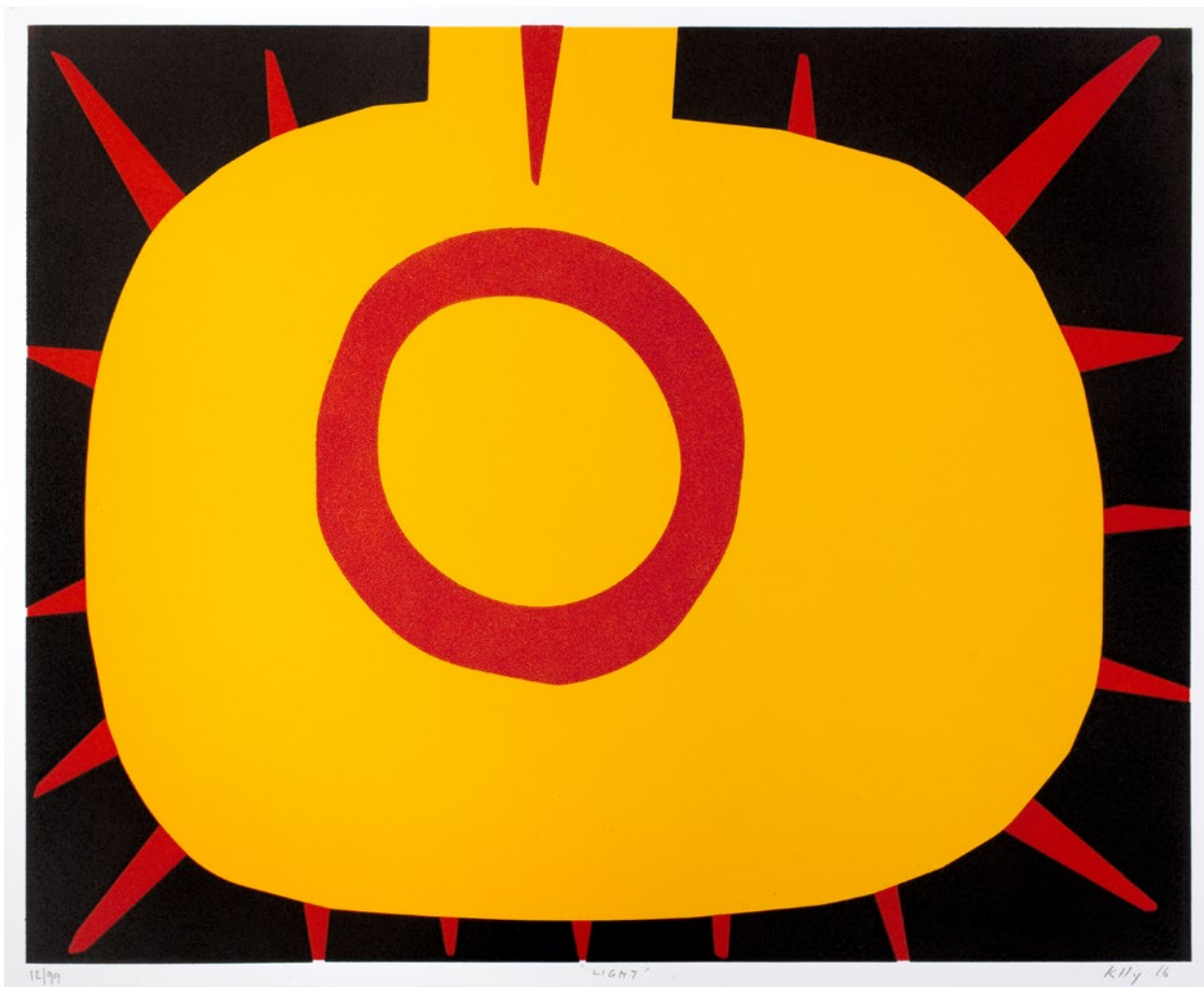
Dwyer: At one stage in your career you were the proprietor of a ham and beef shop, weren’t you?

(Edited extract from the trial of William Dobell, 1944)

A version of this article appeared in *Daily Review*, 19 January 2016; reproduced by kind permission; see <https://dailyreview.com.au/roslyn-oxley9-gallery-and-its-33-year-winning-streak-of-artists-at-the-venice-biennale/35472/>



**MOO
BREW**



John Kelly: *Light*, 2016, etching, 590 x 745

Australia Council Condition of Grant

Ref: 101650 Skills and Arts development Grant recipient: John Kelly

The conditions of this Grant are:

You shall include in all promotional material and publications relating to this project, whether electronic or print a prominent acknowledgement as follows:

“This project has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.”

... You shall also display, in an appropriate size, Council’s logo, which incorporates the kangaroo graphic...



John Kelly: Big Foot, 2005

Yo Overlord!

John Kelly asks the Australia Council to fund a project critical of the Australia Council

Artist John Kelly has often been critical

of the Australia Council’s treatment of the arts as a ‘brand’.

In the the early 2000s he used its kangaroo logo for an art work that eventually saw it adorn MONA owner David Walsh’s ‘Moo Brew’ beer label.

It was an ironic comment on the

Australia Council’s ‘branding’.

But can lightning strike twice?

Now Kelly is asking the Australia Council to fund a new art project that is critical of the institution.

Below, he explains the project and includes his application for funding.

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Last year, the then Minister for the Arts, Senator George Brandis, removed millions of dollars from

the Australia Council and funnelled it back to the Minister’s office for dispersal.

The ‘art world’s’ reaction was that it would lead to the Minister’s office’s pet projects being funded. Others, possibly more tellingly, said nothing, too scared they might put their future funding at risk.

However, whilst supporters of the Australia Council lambasted the Government, others could retort that in the visual arts at least, the Australia Council always ends up at

the door of one or two well-known commercial galleries, so what’s the difference?

The losers in this squabble are the tens of thousands of artists who have become irrelevant to much of the debate surrounding these matters.

The new Arts Minister, Mitch Fifield, recently announced the first recipients of the new ‘Catalyst’ grants available under the ministerial system.

Incredibly, they awarded nearly half a million dollars to one commercial gallery to take an art exhibition to the Oceanographic Museum in Monte Carlo. Funding the commercial sector raises interesting questions of acceptable use of artists’ work.

For example, would the gallery need to furnish proof that all the artists were aware of their work being used in the application? For what is to stop a commercial gallery buying work on the secondary market and then apply for funding using the artists’ names? I am not suggesting the gallery has done this in this case but galleries love big names and if they don’t have them, then they can literally buy them!

No artist has a bigger name than Damian Hirst. A few years back I saw a pretty ropey Hirst exhibition at the Monaco Oceanographic Museum. One could imagine the brand manager’s lightbulb moment! Let’s put Hirst’s dead shark in a museum full of dead fish, a museum that claims to be dedicated to scientific research! That Hirst had a shark killed for art would seem to contradict this ideal. But who cares? People will flock to the show, and they did (including us).

Near Hirst’s shark was a sign that read:

“Sharks...the great species, cornerstone of the marine ecosystems, are now truly

threatened with extinction because man has become the ocean’s greatest predator. Together, we can and must change things.”

The Monaco Oceanographic Museum is not an art gallery. It’s more like the old museum in Melbourne’s Swanston Street with lots of glass cabinets with stuffed, fishy stuff!

Anybody who watched Sunday night telly in the ’70s and ’80s will remember Jacques Cousteau. He was not only a showman but also the director of the museum from 1957 to 1988. The museum is also known for allegedly introducing the algae, nicknamed Killer Algae (C. taxifolia) into the Mediterranean, presumably from cleaning its fish tanks.

My story intersects the above in a strange way. In 2002 I was invited to exhibit a sculpture in Monte Carlo and in accepting the invitation I was served a French lawsuit. I looked for support from the Australia Council, yet there was little coming.

In fact they made my life harder. An application, an appeal and months of time-consuming correspondence – it seemed a waste of time yet at the same time I remember a number of commercial galleries being supported to attend ARCO, an art fair in Madrid.

Whilst I exhibited alongside Alexander Calder, Keith Haring, Niki Saint Phalle, etc. I also had to fight the legal battle, where an art dealer claimed he was my agent based on an unwritten contract that overrode our written contract and that I had been parasitical in accepting the Monte Carlo invitation.

Added to this was that I had also been parasitical in approaching the dealer’s professional connections, including the Australian Embassy in Paris.

After a five-year battle the court found the dealer was not my agent, but that I had been parasitical as accused. To cap it off John Spender, who had been Australian Ambassador in France, gave evidence at the request and in support of the French art dealer based on what he had observed as Australia’s Ambassador. Thanks mate!

However, it may also be my greatest artistic achievement; to be parasitical on an art dealer who did not represent me would seem to be a miraculous feat. However, it took a long time to recover from the ordeal and the work that grew out of this experience has now become known as the ‘Moo Brew’ work.

In researching the role of the Australia Council I learnt that rather than being keen to support artists at this time, they seemed far more interested in attempting to ‘Brand the Arts’ as suggested by Saatchi and Saatchi, in their commissioned report *Australia and the Arts* (2001).

My lightbulb moment was that the Australia Council had evolved into an organisation that was distancing itself from the very people who make art, the artists.

It was actually advocating an anti-art strategy that demands conformity. An analogy might be of the bus company that decides that they could be more efficient if they did not pick up any passengers. Or maybe an oceanographic museum whose reasons to exhibit murdered sharks was seemingly justified because their research funds “come from the entrance fees paid by the public, and the shop and restaurant.” (This quote was taken from the ‘Guide to the Oceanographic Museum Monaco’).

To me at least, it seemed the Australia Council were much more interested in supporting brand managers who they could trust, whether they be curators or commercial galleries, who would



John Kelly: Big Foot, 2005

present a form of Australian art that fitted an acceptable identity of Australia.

They have many willing and possibly many unwitting helpers from the art world. Just look at their participation in the Venice Biennale and the consistency of the selection.

My project began in 2002 and it continues to this day in the form of a question. Can the Australia Council, in a ‘liberal’ country like Australia, support an artist who is critical of the very institution that is being asked to support the project?

I have my doubts, but it seems an important question to ask at a time when few artists are prepared to openly dissent, challenge or be critical of the all powerful institutions, whether that be the

Council or the Minister’s office.

Below is my application to the Australia Council for my art project. I expect to hear whether it has been successful or not in May, 2016.

APPLICATION

Submitted in February, 2016 for up to \$50,000 in funding under the Grant Category: Arts projects for individuals and groups.

In 2003 I wrote an open letter to the then Prime Minister John Howard, to voice my dissent to the Saatchi and Saatchi report ‘Australians and the Arts’ commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts.

One of the key strategies put

forward in this report was ‘Branding the Arts’. Branding by definition is about conformity, which is anti-art, yet the Australia Council went ahead and implemented it anyway.

In response I created an artistic project that involved writing, poetry, painting, sculpture and printmaking and exhibited them in London and Australia. This project allowed me to express dissent to the branding strategy being pursued. I sent my poetry to the Australia Council for the Arts. One response by email was as follows – “Fuckhead: don’t send me this trash – it’s not clever.”

It inspired me to create, and I followed a recommendation of the Saatchi and Saatchi report for art that was “down to earth and accessible.” At the time I was under contract by the Australia Council.

The director of the Visual Arts Board, possibly inadvertently, gave me permission to use the kangaroo and sun motif with my work.

“In The Society of the Spectacle... (Guy Debord) defines the principle of ‘détournement’ as using mainstream communication but including an element of self-critique within it in order to turn the attention of passive consumers of spectacle culture back towards the material considerations of everyday life and historical struggle.”

In 2005, David Walsh (the founder and owner of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart asked to use my work as beer-bottle labels for his Moo Brew beers. To challenge the Australia Council’s ‘Branding the Arts’ strategy and its down-to-earth and accessible recommendation, I could think of nothing more appropriate than beer labels. A ‘Culture Jam’ ensued.

Walsh commissioned six paintings that entered MONA’s collection, and the beer labels went on to become award-winning, and importantly for me artistically, resulted in my work being invited into the *Guangzhou Triennale* (2008) and the *Göteborg Biennale* (2011). Locally, the academic author Adrian Franklin explains the importance of this work in his recent book, *The Making of MONA* (Viking, 2014):

“The Moo Brew story is something of a MONA story writ small. David wanted to create something new, and found himself challenging the way things were done, the established social norms and entrenched patterns of taste. Even though he had the financial clout to make things happen, he didn’t want to become a laughing-stock, so it was a risk.

Moo Brew’s success also consolidated (Leigh) Carmichael (the creative director of MONA)

and Walsh as a partnership that would be significant in the creative genesis of MONA ... Soon after the Moo Brew branding, David showed Leigh his plans for MONA and asked if he was interested in working on it.”

The narrative is complex, and involves, on the one hand, the journey of an Australian artist from Melbourne’s western suburbs to the gardens of the Monte Carlo casino, where he placed a monumental sculpture, that resulted in a French court battle, a journey that takes the artist to MONA.

On the other, it follows a 12-year path that sees the selection of four Australian artists for the *Venice Biennale*, all associated with one gallery; of them, three with strikingly similar studio practices. The narrow presentation is the inevitable result of a branding mentality that selects work befitting a predetermined brand identity, to the exclusion of all others.

Few people know the full story behind this, which is why I ask for your assistance in publishing a book that will bring it to a broader audience, an audience that includes not only seasoned art lovers, but also one outside of the art world. This publication will be as integral to the project as the paintings, sculpture and poetry created.

It will be designed by Leigh Carmichael and written by John McDonald (the art critic of *The Sydney Morning Herald*). The vision is that it will be an art object in itself – an art work that is both critical of the Arts Council – while being supported by the Arts Council – written by an author with the freedom to tell the story as he sees fit. Why? As Oscar Wilde said: “Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name.”

The British contemporary art curator and writer Tom Trevor

writes:

“Since the 1960s many artists... have made work which specifically takes as its subject a critique of the institution that houses art, and the structures – financial and ideological – that support them. However critical such art may itself be, paradoxically, it also serves to highlight the institution’s liberalism by allowing it to be there in the first place. Thus, despite an individual’s best intentions, as soon as they partake in the public discourse of contemporary art they are inevitably implicated in a process of recuperation.

Guy Debord, co-founder of the Situationist International in 1957, described recuperation in a sociological sense, as the procedure by which the mainstream takes a radical idea and repackages it as a safe commodity for consumer society.”

I ask that you support this publishing project so we can literally place the official logo of the Australia Council for the Arts on an art project that criticises the very institution that is helping publish the critique. For only a healthy, robust art institution could consider the recuperation of such an outrageous art project. Whatever you decide, your decision will be an important contribution to a project that has already proven to be a ‘détournement’ de force.

A version of this article appeared in *Daily Review*, 20 March 2016; reproduced by kind permission; see <https://dailyreview.com.au/john-kelly-asks-the-australia-council-to-fund-a-project-critical-of-the-australia-council/39027/>



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John Kelly painting in Venice this week

Same as it ever was. Same as it ever was.

The Venice Biennale and the Australian Pavilion's history of repetition

Artist John Kelly is in Venice – painting – in a visit that coincides with next month's *Venice Biennale*. Kelly is a regular visitor to the *Biennale* and a commentator on the Australia Council-sponsored Australian Pavilion in which (usually) one artist is chosen to represent the country's art.

In 2015 he wrote in *Daily Review* of the coterie of powerful commercial galleries behind Australia's choices in the article 'The 2015 Venice Biennale and the Myopia of Australia's Arts Leaders.'

This year's artist is Tracey Moffatt, whose *My Horizon* project will

“Irony is the song of a bird that has come to love its cage...”

– David Shields (*The Fourth Law of Thermodynamics*)¹

“When we look at Australia's representation in the pavilion it's impossible to think of the

chronicle, and not think about recent Australian art, because we've never got it wrong.” So sang Commissioner Doug Hall while opening the Hany Armanious exhibition at the 2011 *Venice Biennale*.

The writer David Foster Wallace defined 'blind certainty' as “a closed-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he is locked up.”²

Ten years earlier in 2001 ABC reporter Jill Singer filed from the *Venice Biennale*, introducing the work of Robert Gober over an

image of a floor piece consisting of a 'wood' fragment lying across a 'polystyrene' block. Gober was representing the USA and is famous for his 'sinks' – exacting replicas of bathroom sanitation units – that so heavily quote Duchamp's urinal of 1917.

Singer intoned, “...as with his previous work Gober produced meticulous reconstructions of everyday objects, bronze sculptures of Styrofoam blocks, newspaper cut-outs and a gin bottle.”³ Singer cut to artist Imants Tillers, who responded to Gober's work with “...well I thought it was absolutely terrible and I think it's kind of

complacent in a way, and it depends totally on being in the American pavilion and, you know, having all the aura of that. You know if he was to show as an unknown artist in the Australian pavilion nobody would take any notice.”

At the 2011 *Biennale*, Hany Armanious represented Australia. “Armanious creates duplicates of eclectic, everyday objects and presents them in a gallery, thereby turning them into fine art.”⁴ On the floor of the pavilion was a simulacrum of a painted wooden plinth with simulated duct tape patching up a hole. Elsewhere there were Styrofoam-looking

reproductions cast in resin – as a homage to Gober it was, well, gob-smacking.

I am questioning is the curatorial and conceptual repetitiveness of the art exhibited by Australia since 2001

Gober's work relies on exacting reproduction and unusual juxtaposition. For example, his *Untitled Leg*, 1989 – 1990, is a super-realistic sculpture of the lower part of a man's leg complete with shoe, sock, trousers cuff and human hair, the dismembered limb curiously sticking out from the gallery wall. Adrian Searle

described another Gober work in 2001 as “Half-male, half-female human torsos wallow like flesh drowning in itself.”⁵ In 2003 Australia’s representative was Patricia Piccinini with *We are Family*. Her mutant figures including replicated boys, complete with clothes and human hair.

“*Game Boys Advanced* (2002) is a hyperreal sculpture of two boys leaning against the gallery wall...At first they look normal...On closer inspection we can see that the boys are not normal. Their faces are aged, their hair is greying at the temples...Hairs and veins appear on their little arms, and their fingers have thick, yellowing nails.”⁶

“Robert Gober makes hand-crafted sculptures that replicate everyday objects with an eerie precision and, usually, a detail or two that is just a little bit off.”⁷

Alongside Piccinini’s mutant teenagers were crash helmets that had mutated to strangely shaped heads, comprising “...a strange mixture of mask, motorcycle helmet and prosthetic device – all wrapped up into a desirable consumer item displayed on a shelf.”⁸

Skip along two more years and we come across Ricky Swallow representing Australia at Venice, with his exactly meticulous wooden replicas of the everyday object. Swallow’s oeuvre also reflects Gober with his pair of realistically carved hands emerging from the gallery wall, a carved bicycle helmet with slithering snakes, a dismembered arm hanging vertically on the wall, a kitchen table covered with reproductions of fish, a bean bag enveloping a skull. It’s a type of photorealism reproduced in three dimensions.

Fast forward to 2013 and 2015 and we find Simryn Gill and Fiona Hall respectively representing Australia in Venice. Gill’s approach “...

to making art involve adapting everyday and found objects... into mordant, yet playful pieces: a Native American (‘Red Indian’) head dress, for instance, fashioned from dried chillies...”⁹ “Hall’s work is enormously popular, partly because of its clever use of everyday objects, from the sardine cans...”¹⁰

Look back a hundred years and we find DADA challenging the orthodoxy: “Dada artists, for example...modeled a headpiece fashioned of sardine cans.”¹¹ 1917 is also when Duchamp’s urinal was created, and so we are back to Gober’s bathroom sinks in 2001. But let’s go via the German pavilion, also in 2001, where we find Gregor Schneider meticulously reconstructing the interior of his family home that is situated in the German town of Rheydt. “I dream about taking the whole house away with me and building it somewhere else...”¹² Six years later Australia’s representative Callum Morton’s Valhalla reconstructed his Melbourne family home as part of Australia’s presentation in Venice.

Why are we promoting such a narrow view of Australian Art?

Shaun Gladwell was Australia’s representative in 2009. Along with his stunt videos he exhibited an exact replica of a car and motorbike.

If you think I am criticising the artists for their conceptual heritage, I am not. Rather than criticising the art, what I am questioning is the curatorial and conceptual repetitiveness of the art exhibited by Australia since 2001. For by definition contemporary art should be erratic, inconsistent, diverse and elusive, just as it is in the global art landscape. However, Australia has consistently shown work that might be termed Post-Modernist but which is traceable not just to the primary experience (DADA 1917) or even the secondary (American Art of the ’50s and ’60s) but to tertiary sources of the ’80s and ’90s (Gober). The

question is, why are we promoting such a narrow view of Australian art?

Ten years ago, David Foster Wallace argued persuasively that the problem with Post-Modernism is that it offers no hope, that it simply identifies our situation to the point that the prisoner can’t see the bars – our Venice pavilion might be regarded as the offshore detention centre.

“Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That’s what made the early postmodernists great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates ... The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, “then” what do we do? ... Postmodern irony and cynicism’s become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what’s wrong, because they’ll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony’s gone from liberating to enslaving. There’s some great essay somewhere that has a line about irony being the song of the prisoner who’s come to love his cage.”¹³

This imprisonment leads to a form of curatorial and artistic narcissism which begets a form of elite consumerism to satisfy the needs of that narcissistic personality – much the way western advertising and consumerism uses exclusivity and exclusion to encourage consumerist behaviour, with any perceived criticism being met by the closing of the mind while looking for internal support. It’s just as how Facebook excludes ‘friends’ that have not been ‘liked’ – an ‘echo chamber’ or ‘bubble’ environment is

created. This allows the Australian art establishment, as reflected in the presentations at Venice, to maintain their ‘blind certainty’, because it grows out of a ‘blind privilege’ and blots out all other possibilities.

But what of those critics who have tried to question the perceived orthodoxy and establishment art, for surely the Australia Council for the Arts, whose pavilion it is, supports diversity? My experience suggests not. In 2002 I challenged the ‘Branding the Arts’ strategy advocated by the Australia Council. This strategy grew out of the Saatchi and Saatchi report ‘Australians and the Arts’ (2001) which advocated Australian art should be down to earth and accessible. More recently I have questioned the repetitiveness of the presentations when writing on the past decade of Australia at the Venice Biennale. I have constructively pointed out the works origins within a clearly identified establishment of commercial galleries and museums¹⁴ who promoted this Official Oz Art (let’s call it ‘OOzA’). As expected, you get blow-back, like in 2002 when an Australia Council employee’s email response to me read:

Fuckhead:

don’t send me this trash – it’s not clever

All petty stuff, but none is more damning of an institution set up to support artists in Australia than what a well-known journalist told me of a conversation he had at the 2009 *Venice Biennale* with a senior Australia Council representative at the time. “Please do not to have anything to do with John Kelly,” she advised him.

The evidence suggests that branded OOzA exists and by identifying and tracing it you realise that it has squeezed out many other alternative Australian artists in an epoch of great Australian creativity. Sadly, it brings to mind Henry Lawson’s

advice to young Australian writers which is as apt today for artists as it was 100 years ago, just as Duchamp was exhibiting his non-functional urinal.

“My advice to any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognised would be to do steerage, stow away, swim, and seek London, Yankeeland, or Timbuctoo – rather than stay in Australia till his genius turns to gall, or beer. Or, failing this – and still in the interests of human nature and literature – to study elementary anatomy, especially as it applies to the cranium, and then shoot himself carefully with the aid of a looking glass.”

– Henry Lawson 1867 – 1922

1. <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/david-shields-the-fourth-law-of-thermodynamics/>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>
3. <https://vimeo.com/71176842>
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6. <http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/printessay.php?id=27>
7. <https://www.moma.org/artists/2199>
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10. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/fiona-hall-unveils-work-for-2015-venice-biennale-20150324-1m6dbi.html>
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13. <http://conversationalreading.com/cynicism-in-infinite-jest/>
14. <https://dailyreview.com.au/the-2015-venice-biennale-and-the-myopia-of->

australias-arts-leaders/23465/

A version of this article appeared in *Daily Review*, 30 April 2017; reproduced by kind permission; see <https://dailyreview.com.au/venice-biennale-some-more-of-the-same/59128/>

‘TO BETTER COMMUNICATE’ From the Prime Minister

the role of the arts our love of the the Arts Australians and the Arts
this report
by
Saatchi and Saatchi [sic] on behalf
of the Australia Council

Saatchi and Saatchi [sic] Found
key challenges facing
the Arts community
to better communicate

I want
Saatchi and Saatchi
the Australia Council
to mould the presentation of the Arts the content
of what is produced
the way it is communicated

From: ■■■■ <■■■■@ozco.com.au>

To: ‘Ern Malley’ <■■■■@hotmail.com> Subject: RE: Ern Malley poem
– The Value of the Arts Date: Wed, 27 Nov 2002 09:20:21 +1000

Fuckhead:

don’t send me this trash – it’s not clever

Received from an Australia Council employee in response to some of the found
poetry.



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Tracey Moffatt at the Venice Biennale: memories are made of this

“In Photography, as everyone knows, content is 90 percent of the ball game.

To get good subject matter, you find it. This makes photography the only art form in which shopping is considered a talent”

— Peter Plagen¹

The lens and screen are omnipresent in Venice. Not only in Piazza San Marco but for over two decades in

the Australian Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale*. In 1995 Bill Henson was the first Australian photographer to exhibit lens-based work, followed by Lyndal Jones in 2001, Patricia Piccinini in 2003, Susan Norrie in 2007 (outside the Pavilion) and Shaun Gladwell in 2009. Tracey Moffatt is exhibiting this year and she follows Fiona Hall (2015), a trained photographer, and Simryn Gill (2013), who is best known for her photographs *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century*.

Back in the '70s when Susan Sontag wrote the seminal essays on photography in *The New York Review of Books*, collated into *On Photography*, she was able to explore

the medium's dualities, contradictions and associations with advertising, war, pornography, propaganda, media, cinema, etc. Back then, before the camera phone, internet and ease of access to 'video', the artists using the medium were more easily identifiable for they were small in number and worked at the edges or outside the mainstream, commercial use of the technology – so, for example, Diane Arbus' images of marginalised people created a glimpse into the shadowlands of society. 'Art' photography had an edgy, voyeuristic feel to it and sat outside the commercialism and everyday use of the medium by the public. It's a little more complicated today.



Tracey Moffatt: *Bedroom*, from the *Body Remembers* series

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Alfred Stieglitz, whose work hovers gently over Tracey Moffatt's new imagery here in Venice, was another whose photographs of clouds endeavoured to find an aesthetic free of commercial imperatives or associations. His importance within the development of Modern Art in America helped bring photography closer to the world of art than possibly any other. However, the medium of the lens has a complex history. Just think of Stalin's use of photography to 'airbrush' people from history, or the Zapruder JFK film, Vietnam and recent news reports from Syria, and one realises that lens-based

media need to be approached with caution, especially in a post-truth world, one in which automated robotics are just as likely to take great photographs as any human (NASA's Mars rovers' landscape shots, for example). So where do we begin with Tracey Moffatt's *My Horizon*? How do we approach the lens work of an artist who melds fact with fiction in both still and moving imagery?

Is Tracey Moffatt an important artist or simply one of billions of photographers / videographers out there?

I began by taking the Museum of Modern Art's online course, 'Seeing through Photographs'. For €45 I was enrolled in a six-week course looking at what makes a photograph culturally and artistically important. After all, estimates suggest that there may be as many as 14 trillion photographs taken in 2017² and as many as 5 billion videos watched on YouTube each day³. All of which may be considered art, and the skill level needed to take a 'great' photograph is now child's play.

For example, ten years ago Gladwell was showing a slow-motion video in Venice that anyone can now reproduce



Tracey Moffatt: *Frame with Ghost Stills #1*, from the *The White Ghosts Sailed* in series

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on a smartphone in seconds. Or look at the current National Gallery of Victoria’s exhibition of Patrick Pound’s found photographs. Each ‘found’ photograph is mesmerising in its own snatched moment in time, and when ‘visually merchandised’ into sets they are very impressive. I have seen a number of these found photograph / video exhibitions around the world and all are interesting, but again it raises the question of how do we discern what should be considered important and what is not? Is Tracey Moffatt an important artist or simply one of billions of photographers / videographers out there; or does the fact she has access to an art gallery make this artist’s work significant and important? What sets Moffatt apart?

From my MOMA course I learnt that it’s really the artist’s biography that gives the work sufficient gravitas to be considered important by MOMA. Who pressed the shutter button, their place in time, their history, who printed it, who cropped it, who wrote the description, what were the intentions and where was it published and exhibited? – these are what they consider. However, this importance can be fluid, such as MOMA’s collection of NASA’s moon-landing photographs, which have helped change the concept of how we humans view our place in the universe but were taken for altogether non-artistic reasons.

They were simply a matter of record, a remarkable one, and only entered the art museum when images such as the ‘Blue Marble’ had such a profound effect.

Moffatt has given voice to the many who have grown up in a society where to be shunned, ignored and discriminated against is the norm.

So, what’s so special about Tracey Moffatt? Well for 30 years Moffatt has been Australia’s most visible contemporary artist in this medium. Like Arbus, Moffatt has looked into areas that many Australians are exceedingly uncomfortable with, namely the violent collision between Indigenous culture and colonialism and the resultant violence and alienation this has caused. Moffatt has produced series upon series of poetic imagery that has placed Indigenous Australians at the centre of her art, juxtaposed into contemporary landscapes and histories that are simultaneously fictional and true. And it is that contradictory space that makes her narrative compelling. Along with a number of other contemporary Indigenous artists, such as Destiny Deacon, Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Richard Bell and more, Moffatt has given voice to the many who have grown up in a society where to be shunned, ignored and discriminated against is the norm. That they decided to enter the world of art, where it is

normal to be shunned, ignored and discriminated against, is an act of defiant bravery.

So, what can I possibly say as a privileged, middle-aged, white male Australian of Anglo Irish heritage that can in any way be meaningful? I find it difficult, just as I am reluctant to comment on Jessie Jones’ powerful work in the Irish Pavilion that touches on the issue of abortion in a country struggling with its post-Catholic history. In speaking with curator Tessa Giblin, the Irish Pavilion curator, she suggested the common thread between artists such as Moffatt, Jones and Lisa Reihana (New Zealand Pavilion) is the right to self-determination, and I cannot disagree. The three pavilions make this powerful statement in unison, despite the difference in subject matter.

In Moffatt’s case her own well-known personal history distinguishes her from her predecessors like Bill Henson, Lyndal Jones, Gladwell, Hall and Gill, for Moffatt’s is an authentic experience of growing up as an Indigenous woman in a colonised Australia, which means she has not needed to go shopping for her subject matter – she has lived it.

Moffatt may be returning to memories of her family members working in domestic servitude, but she is fully present in the conflict strewn contemporary.

Others might and do take a different view, like the Australian art critic Robert Nelson, who in the past has questioned Moffatt’s motives. In 2004 he stated that:

“Moffatt’s artistic detachment is confirmed in statements of astonishing coldness. An example was an ABC broadcast where she opined that artists can turn their ‘tragedies into artworks and therefore money spinners.’ You’re confounded and mystified, because – as with Moffatt’s pictures – you can’t determine if the rhetoric is disarming, or ironic, or cynical.”⁴

Given Moffatt’s biography, I feel it is perfectly acceptable for the work to be disarming, ironic and cynical, and in

my view this is its strength. How could they be anything else? In the video *The White Ghosts Sailed* in the artist uses a fictional history overlaid on Sydney Heads to express a fundamental truth, one which is then succinctly reflected on the Pavilion’s tote-bag, which reads on one side *Indigenous Rights* and on the other *Refugee Rights* – put them together and they scream *HUMAN RIGHTS*.

Her more poetic expressions are in a medium that so effectively colonised the globe, that is the lens, which like western media is both informative and culpable, as in the work *Vigil* (2017) where images of Elizabeth Taylor and Jimmy Stewart (a reference to the photographer in *Rear Window*) are cut between news footage of refugee boats sinking, while opposite in *Body Remembers* (2017) a maid returns to an abandoned station house like a refugee returning home after a war – it is both real and imagined, as Moffatt lifts the camera into the glare of the Australian sun. Moffatt may be returning to memories of her family members working in domestic servitude, but she is fully present in the conflict-strewn contemporary.

The broader question that this exhibition brings forth is that, at a time when a tsunami of lens-based imagery is swamping the blue marble, why has Australian chosen a photographer / video artist to hold a solo exhibition in the Australian Pavilion? The third in a row, even if Hall and Gill work in other media as well. Quite clearly Moffatt should have been selected many years ago. It’s an important question to be addressed, for one can easily imagine Moffatt having been selected in 1995 in place of Bill Henson, given that in retrospect Moffatt’s work engages far more challenging subject matter to do with Australia’s cultural identity than Henson ever has. Look at Nathalie Thomas’ recent article, ‘Bursting Bill’s Bubble’, and you might find one reason; Thomas states:

“The Elites and the Poseurs all love Bill. The work is beyond the intellectual understanding of the Plebs or the Basket of



Tracey Moffatt: *Mad Captain*, from the *Passage* series

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Deplorables...Where critics see Bill’s work as: ‘dark, bruised, soft porn starring beautiful youth on the cusp of adulthood for rich collectors,’ that’s wrong. Bill’s work is really about how life has the potential to go wrong. Morgi calls Bill Henson’s work *White Australia Gothic in the imperialist tradition...*⁵

Or you could look at Australia’s 2001 artist Lyndal Jones’ ABC interview, marvel at her banality, and wonder how this could be regarded as conceptually superior to Moffatt 16 years ago:

“I took this ultra-close up of the water and then every now and then you would see the side of a boat and you would realise what it was, but in a sense you could see a lot of it, um it becomes like an abstraction.”⁶

Or Fiona Hall’s “...video of a spider in a Chinese cork-landscape diorama and real spiders weaving webs around a collection of such dioramas....”,⁷ which is a reworking of the World War One German propaganda poster *L’Entente Cordiale* and which, when combined with her military-camouflage creations based on African sculpture, seem somewhat culturally insensitive or possibly even racist. Or Simryn Gill, who exhibited slick aerial photos of mines in the desert that complemented Shaun Gladwell’s

2009 *Maddestmaximvs*, which read like television commercials set in the Australian outback. How could this have taken precedence over Moffatt’s sustained body of work that dealt with the issue that is at the core of Australia’s modern identity? The exhibition raises this crucial question to our cultural leaders, and they should try and answer it so that this pavilion is never again used to display the ‘shopping’ of the few at the expense of the many.

1. Peter Plagen, ‘Fretting About Photos: Four Views’, *Art in America*, November, 1979
2. <http://mylio.com/true-stories/tech-today/how-many-digital-photos-will-be-taken-2017-repost>
3. <https://fortunelords.com/youtube-statistics/>
4. <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/13/1073877810745.html>
5. <https://nattysolo.com/2017/04/13/bursting-bills-bubble-the-plebs-vs-the-poseurs/>
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