



NEWS & COMMENTARY, VISUAL ARTS

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

BY JOHN KELLY | MARCH 20, 2016 |

Artist John Kelly has often been critical of the Australia Council's treatment of the arts as a 'brand'.

In 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.

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 light bulb 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 **Australian and the Arts** (2001).

My light bulb 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 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 Goteborg 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.

Related stories:

An artist returns to Sunshine

John Kelly's en plein air in Antartica

[box]Big Foot by John Kelly, 2005. [/box]



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John Kelly

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).