

# CULTURAL EVOLUTION

## REFLECTIONS FROM ONE OF 'CULTURAL IMPERIALISM'S' PROTAGONISTS

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#### NOW AND THEN:

Nearly forty years ago I contributed to a conversation with Brian Medlin, Ian North and others, in which we commented on what was wrong with the artworld and on each other's perceived failure to diagnose the situation correctly.

I wasn't able to deal with either of these issues as lucidly as I might have done. The elusive underlying question was not about whether artists deserved censure for making works of art of one sort rather than another sort. It was about the artworld's confusing identification of *art* (something that can't be deliberately made) with *works of art* (that can be deliberately made). The artworld has still not properly grasped the point that 'art' and 'works of art' are not alternative names for the same thing. They are the names of things of two very different sorts, and the relationship between them is not one of logical necessity or identity. It is contingent and accidental.

Works of art are those things that are endorsed by the artworld as works of art, whether for a good reason or for a bad reason or for no reason at all. In particular, works of art are not distinguishable from other things on the basis that they alone incarnate *art* in a uniquely distinctive way. Endless confusion flows from the use of the word "art" as if it meant 'those things that the artworld endorses as works of art'. It took me a disgracefully long time to see this simple point clearly enough to unpack its radical implications.<sup>1</sup> The convenient slogan '*Art is a homonym*' eluded me until quite recently.<sup>2</sup>

This useful mantra goes along with the recognition that the primary use of the word "art" is to collect together cases of *memetic innovation*, as contrasted with cases in which familiar memes are deliberately deployed. New memes are in principle unexpected, and cultural evolution is shaped by them. Familiar memes only serve to perpetuate the cultural forms that are already established. Art is about discovery. New memes offer us shareable ways of exploiting revelations about regular ways of doing or thinking or feeling something that we had not previously known to be possible. Such discoveries can occur in any domain of common interest and not only – or perhaps even very often – in the course of our encounters with works of art.

Like all the items of every recognisable cultural kind, works of art are instrumentally exploitable in a vast range of ways, among which the service of cultural imperialism is only one. This plain truth was and remains almost too trivial to have been worth discussing. What mattered then, as it matters now, is not the question of what uses can or can't, or should or shouldn't, be made of works of art. It was and it remains the question of what art is and how it relates to works of art. The artworld opinion that the two are effectively identical is profoundly mistaken.

In a rudimentary form it was this insight that motivated my initiation of the (then) Experimental Art Foundation and Ian North's participation in it, but we were not yet ready to confront the artworld with the plain charge that it had feloniously misappropriated the word "art" for its own limited institutional purposes. It is therefore not surprising that we were unable to deal as cogently as we might have done with the big issue that divided the artworld at the time: namely, the American cultural imperialism that was seducing many artists versus the construction of a distinct Australian cultural identity.

Apprehensions either about capitalism in general or about America's aggressive cultural ambitions certainly coloured many people's thinking on these topics, and because the fear of loss of autonomy will not go away this opportunity to revisit the old *Broadsheet* site is worth taking; not just because of the heritage look it has acquired under the yellowing varnish of time.

#### SOME BACKGROUND:

Brian Medlin and I were dealing in those days with the aftermath of the 1974 'Occupation' at Flinders University. We were embattled against a majority of the academic and administrative staff over a student protest sparked by a stupid assessment decision made in the History Department. The students' disgruntlement was interpreted as a Marxist or Maoist threat to Western civilisation of such gravity that it had to be brutally put down before shop windows were smashed in Rundle Street, the University library burnt to the ground and the Vice-Chancellor hanged from the portico of the Registry.

It was obvious to any sane person amused by the posturing of the *Adelaide Advertiser* that South Australia was not about to be inundated by the tsunami of revolution that had swept through Paris in 1968. The dispute at Flinders University was trivial and the students were right about it; but getting myself seriously offside with senior management in this way was frustrating my effort to have the name of my field of study changed from "Fine Arts" to "Visual Arts". This was not a trivial issue, and the fact that its implications have still not worked their way comprehensively through the artworld explains why a visit to the old battleground is not merely nostalgic.

I think now that "Visual Artworks" would have been a better way of naming a potential field of academic study than "Visual Arts"; but the main purpose then was to get rid of the traditional name "Fine Arts" because of the way it pre-empts answers to the very questions that we should have been asking. Why is it that a pictorial representation of a naked person, handmade with oil paint, is unhesitatingly identified as a work of fine art, whereas a pictorial representation of a foetus, handmade on a computer screen with ultrasound, does not even qualify as a work of art and most certainly not as a work of fine art?

Medlin's position on all of this was less radical than mine. We both took it for granted that "artist" is the name courteously bestowed upon those people who make works of art, but he seemed to believe, as I did not, that there must be some regular condition-governed way of distinguishing works of art from those things that are made by other people (as well as by artists in their spare time) that are not counted as works of art. He was never quite explicit about this, but unshakably confident that even if the criterion should turn out to be *aesthetic* as the artworld obviously believed, any aesthetic merit imputed to a work would always be trumped by ideology. It was my contrary conviction that works of art share no common identifying characteristic whatsoever (apart from their arbitrary endorsement as works of art by the artworld), and that ideological considerations carry no more clout in principle than any other grounds of commendation or censure.

As a matter of fact the artworld's obsession with the riding instructions that Australian artists should be given by theorists and other bystanders was not seriously philosophical. It was not even ideological, but rather narrowly political. Should artists be adopting an international



style (called “mainstream modernism” of which the headquarters had recently been moved from Paris to New York), or should they devote themselves to the construction of a distinctively Australian cultural identity? Medlin’s detestation of the works on display in the exhibition *Some Recent American Art* was not primarily driven by this way of polarising the options, although it was obvious where his sympathies lay. I recall that he would visit us in Adelaide’s Kingston Terrace with his shotgun slung over his shoulder after first tethering his goat to a fence across the street where it could graze on the verge. Alternatively, when we took tea with him in the suburb of Prospect he would stand us around the campfire in his backyard where we could watch him swing the billy around his Akubra hat. I took all this to be performance work of a local culturally identifying sort, in which the gentleman-grazier role seemed rather ambiguously related to capitalism. Neither Ian North nor I were enthusiastic about capitalism but, because we had no handy alternative ready to go our response to his polemic shared the theme that in spite of everything there was much to admire in the works of art that some artists – even some American artists – were making at the time. Our misgivings about the ideology that was driving the art market and debauching the minds of art-appreciators were implicitly, rather than explicitly, incarnated in the doctrines of the Experimental Art Foundation. We were critical of the institutional status quo, but our failure to direct our rhetorical artillery directly against Nelson Rockefeller and Mr and Mrs J. Heinz II exposed us to the taunt of a pusillanimous liberalism.

#### MOVING ON:

Projecting the situation forward, there are parallels with more recent and more widespread concerns over the partial and distorted way in which the news is constructed by the capitalist news media. Robert Manne, for example, analyses the misbehaviours of the Murdoch Press very persuasively in his *Quarterly Essay* ‘Bad news’.<sup>3</sup> He is reproved by Ted Tietze in a blog called ‘Limits of liberal critique’,<sup>4</sup> in which the point is made that under capitalism all media operators advance their proprietors’ interests against the real interests of the people. He concludes that fixing up News Limited in the ways in which Manne proposes will not change the game. Capitalism is the bottle in which liberal dissidents buzz just as helplessly as all the other flies.

Things have certainly changed since 1975. Capitalism is staring ruin in the face, and the fact that nobody has a viable alternative ready to go scares the daylights out of many of us. We can only contemplate with dismay all the repulsive barbarisms that will contend for the vacant space. A faint hope of salvation has recently been peddled by tech-savvy optimists, arguing that there is still time for an evolutionary change both in the way news is constructed by the capitalist media and in the way works of art are identified by the capitalist artworld. The Australian government has started to investigate what it calls the “digital culture public sphere”, in which the forms of social interaction presently dominated by powerful institutions and interest groups are predicted to expand into an inflationary universe of private tweeters. It seems to be envisaged that the personal concerns of notionally autonomous individuals, all fingering their iPads, will somehow frustrate the concerted machinations of the rich and powerful. Maybe so, although the ghost of Ayn Rand seems to loom more substantially behind this vision than does that of Karl Marx. What should we think about the danger that the precious baby of benign and collectively endorsed consensus on matters of common interest may be thrown out with the dirty bathwater of the malignantly concerted corporations? To be even more practical: without a well-managed production line who will manufacture the iPads on which the revolution relies? In any event the institution that is now generally called the visual arts will hold out against Facebook and YouTube to the last gasp. There is a simple and brutal reason for this. It is because the treasure trove of works of visual art shored in the vaults of the art museums are eternally available as sustaining evidence – should evidence be needed – that aesthetic quality is both real and materially incarnated right here. We shall be told that this guarantee of probity does not rest on the casual assurance of trendy curators who can’t be trusted; it rests on the final and authoritative judgment of History.

The music world, the performance world and the worlds of literature differ in two significant ways from the visual artworld in this respect. In these other institutional domains the canon serves a purpose similar to that of the art museum, but the canon is an intangible construction

of the mind, vulnerable to challenge and revision. By contrast, the aesthetic quality of the works of visual art preserved in art museums is guaranteed not only by the material presence of the canonical objects, but also by the reliable index of their cash value, which has been established by a market that may occasionally boom and bust but will never go away.

#### WHAT ARE WE TO DO?:

Visual artists have been commentating on this state of affairs for over a century; at first with awe, then defensively, now satirically. Their critique, however, remains essentially liberal in the sense that Brian Medlin (and perhaps Ted Tietze) deplore. Even the most dissenting artists must buzz inside the bottle of artworld or become invisible, as well as inaudible. I commented in a previous *Broadsheet* text<sup>5</sup> on Damian Hirst’s brazenly complicit *Golden Calf* that was offered as an object of profane worship and auctioned by Sothebys in 2008 for £10 million. The buzzing of liberal artists trapped in the artworld bottle may be even more high-pitched in this year’s Saatchi-sponsored exhibition *Saatchi Gallery in Adelaide: British Art Now* than it was in *Some Recent American Art* four decades ago, but this would surely not deflect Medlin’s attack had he survived for long enough to persist with it. Nor have I changed my own opinion that he was and would still be wrong. This is not because capitalism is a corrupt ideology and the artworld is by no means the most redeeming part of it, but because of the fundamental misunderstanding about art that he and the artworld shared.

The misidentification of art with the class of works of art relies on the fiction that “aesthetic quality” is both the essence of art and the crucial identifying characteristic of works of art. Attempts to break this nexus have been going on for well over a century, but against the grain of cultural tradition and against the invisible hand of the market. So-called ‘aesthetic quality’ has certainly taken a battering from urinals, bicycle wheels, unmade beds and contraptions like Delvoye’s cloaca machine, but its defenders have responded with only a small tactical retreat. The expression “aesthetic quality” has given way to the even more opaque and less vulnerable expression “quality”, used as the hermetically minimal epithet of commendation by artworld initiates. Quality is the curators’ ultimate rationale – at once ineffable and inscrutable – for selecting those things that take their fancy to store in art museums instead of encouraging them to seek a place in the ethnographic museums or the science museums or the social history museums, or in yesteryear’s more frankly open-minded cabinet of curiosities.

There is no easy way out of the artworld bottle for artists, just as there is no easy way out of capitalism for journalists. If artists were to take a serious interest in what art is (which is really the only way out) they would be in danger of losing their foothold in the artworld, and hence their status as artists. If the things they decide to make and do are not endorsed by the artworld as works of art they must choose some other trade and aspire to immortality in some other museum of collectables.

All is not lost. Artists are entitled to ruminate that stumbling accidentally upon art while making works of art is no less likely to occur than when they are making other things. So why not make works of art? Even with its increasingly indifferent or sceptical audience the visual artworld is still an interesting branch of the entertainment industry. Art – the memetic innovation that shapes cultural evolution – will always be with us in any case, so the slow extinction of the artworld will not greatly matter. Considered as a social institution of a few hundred years’ duration it will always remain an object of curiosity for cultural historians.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An account of this can be found in my extended essay ‘The awful truth about what art is’, published by *Artlink*, Adelaide, 2008

<sup>2</sup> The point and its relevance to experimental art is clearly made in my keynote address ‘Experimental art’ delivered in Sydney at the National Institute for Experimental Arts Conference in September 2011. It is available at <http://blogs.unsw.edu.au/niea-experimentalartsconference/files/2011/08/DONALD-BROOK-Experimental-Art.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Robert Manne, ‘Bad news: Murdoch’s Australian and the Shaping of the nation’, *Quarterly Essay* 43, September 2011

<sup>4</sup> Ted Tietze, ‘Limits of liberal critique: Murdoch, the media and the Manne Quarterly Essay’, at <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/2910204.html>

<sup>5</sup> Donald Brook, ‘1968 and all that: 40 years later’, *Broadsheet* 37.4, 2008: 271-273