



IN THIS ISSUE *BROADSHEET* INVITED PETER TIMMS TO ARTICULATE FURTHER HIS CONCERNS AS EXPRESSED IN HIS RECENT PUBLICATION *WHAT'S WRONG WITH CONTEMPORARY ART?* [UNSW PRESS]: IN FOLLOWING ISSUES *BROADSHEET* WILL COMMISSION RESPONSES TO TIMMS' BOOK FROM A NUMBER OF NATIONAL VISUAL ART CRITICS AND CULTURAL COMMENTATORS

# WORSHIPPING THINGS

PETER TIMMS

*...the works of the second half of the twentieth century are different from and even contrary to those of the first half. They are not illuminated by the ambiguous, violent light of Lucifer: they are twilight works. Is the melancholy Saturn our numen? Perhaps, although Saturn is fond of nuance. Mythology*

*paints him as the sovereign of a spiritual golden age whose strength is sapped by black bile, melancholy; a mood partial to chiaroscuro. Our time, by contrast, is simplistic, superficial and merciless. Having fallen into the idolatry of ideological systems, our century has ended by worshipping Things.<sup>1</sup>*

Above: Antony Hamilton, *Hung white fox and shadow*, 1999  
Photo courtesy the artist and Art Gallery of SA, Adelaide  
Reproduced in *What's Wrong With Contemporary Art?*

Recently, I read a short newspaper review of *The Barbarian Invasions*, which stated authoritatively that the film was 'well made but pretentious'. How is it pretentious I wondered? Certainly it deals with big metaphorical subjects – death and the values by which we lead our lives – but then even *Gladiator* did that, in its way. No, I think what the reviewer was objecting to were scenes in which the characters revealed their connoisseurship, their easy familiarity with great novels and works of art. They were given to sitting around dinner tables over glasses of wine discussing ideas. The film was, in other words, peopled by what [Australian] politician Tony Abbott refers to contemptuously as 'intellectual elites' – that is, civilised and cultivated human beings, as distinct from ignorant thugs, who are, presumably, more to Mr. Abbott's taste. *The Barbarian Invasions* pits a son's *wealth* against his father's *richness*, and comes out unequivocally in favour of the latter.

Wealth is something we are all familiar with, whether we already possess it or merely aspire to it. Richness [that is, an ability to lead a fulfilling, meaningful life, with a proper concern for others and a capacity for honest self-reflection] falls much less into our realm of understanding, since we no longer have any generally accepted way of measuring or appreciating non-material values. We live in a society in which moral values have become almost a taboo subject. Whereas in the past we were proud to call ourselves citizens, today we are content to be consumers, defined only by our spending power.

Although my recently published book, *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art*,<sup>2</sup> has elicited a number of published reviews and commentaries, none [at the time of writing] has properly acknowledged the book's main concern, which is the pernicious effects on the arts of uncontrolled commercialism and commodification and how they might be overcome. Commentaries on the book have preferred to concentrate on the details rather than the overall theme. Today, both art and the individuals who produce it are little more than commodities to be bought and sold. The result, as I point out, is a loss of any values other than monetary ones. *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art* is, above all, a plea for more concentration on richness and less on wealth. In that sense, it is an argument for Romanticism as opposed to the Realism [or utilitarianism] that characterises most contemporary art.

As the Australian economics commentator Clive Hamilton has pointed out, "neo-liberal economists are schooled in mathematics and economic theory and are innocent of philosophy, psychology and history.

They are notorious for their ignorance of the fact that neoclassical economics embodies a specific philosophical position known as 'utilitarianism'. So, for them, just as the capitalist firm described in the textbooks transforms inputs into goods and services for the market, wellbeing is produced by pouring goods and services into a receptacle marked 'human being' – as if people were production processes that convert commodities into happiness."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, there is no inherent virtue in poverty. Wealth, or at least a certain amount of it, does bring a degree of happiness [or perhaps contentment is a more appropriate word]. A fulfilling and meaningful life is a good deal easier when you have a full belly and warm toes in winter. One problem, however, is that wealth is something that you never know when you have enough of. It's an addiction, for governments and organisations as well as for individuals. Economists, keen to exploit that addiction, and refusing to stay within their area of expertise, have thereby seized control over almost every aspect of our lives. They have established what is, effectively, a totalitarian regime, in which their simplistic utilitarianism is the only game permitted. They have reduced democracy to a meaningless charade, in which two virtually identical parties argue about trivial things, leaving the CEOs of major economic institutions to get on with running the country.

This has, understandably, left artists with a nagging sense of their own irrelevance. As in any totalitarian state, the choice is a stark one: either embrace the dominant ideology or disappear. As a result, wealth has now become our only measure of quality. Arts writer Jane Rankin-Reid, for example, recently wrote a piece critical of Robert Hughes for his attacks on Jean Michel Basquiat a decade or so ago. Hughes' opinions of that artist, she says, have been proven wrong by the fact that Basquiat's works now sell for millions of dollars. "Fortunately," she adds, "we so-called arbiters of creative integrity come a pale second to how the art market works. That's how it should be."<sup>4</sup> Money talks and everything else must be silent.

We might have expected the academy [the universities and art schools] to put up some resistance, promoting other points of view and other values. After all, universities have, in the past, been bastions against a plethora of barbarian invasions. We might have expected the same from the media, too, especially the government funded media, which were established precisely for this purpose. But they, too, have been co-opted by politicians, just as they are in totalitarian regimes, and they also talk about wealth rather than richness. Hence ABC television puts its resources into populist

pap like *Mondo Thingo* while paying no serious attention at all to Australian art, and Radio National devotes large chunks of its *Deep End* program to pop songs, in case someone might accuse it of becoming too intellectual.

The Australia Council used to boast that its aim was to 'encourage excellence'. That was in the days when excellence was considered something worth aspiring to. Today the word smacks of elitism, so the Australia Council can only state limply that it "supports and promotes the practice and enjoyment of the arts", a much less exalted aim, but one far better suited to the conception of art as a product in the marketplace whose main purpose is to entertain the masses and keep them off the streets. Elitism is fine in sport, of course. Even Mr. Abbott enthuses about our elite athletes. And when I saw him a few weeks ago [at the time of writing] alighting from his limousine outside Sydney's InterContinental Hotel, it struck me that he probably thinks elitism is appropriate to his own line of work as well. It's just 'intellectual' elitism that scares the pants off him and his kind, because it reminds them of their own limitations. But it's worth asking why the Australia Council, in common with other public institutions, which once saw it as their role to foster intellectual and cultural life, have been so ready to roll over and appease them. The Australia Council's view of itself as a promotional organisation for the arts is predicated on the assumption that the product is simply a given and that it is necessary only to convince as many people as possible to buy it. It's not the job of any PR organisation to question the quality of what's being hyped, only to continually expand the market for it. Nor does PR ever encourage people to think for themselves, only to believe what they are told. It is always deeply patronising.

Hence, in the June 2004 issue of *Ozco News* [the Australia Council Newsletter], a puff-piece about *Heartwork*, a new publication 'showcasing' arts projects in regional centres, contains the following statement from the Council's CEO Jennifer Bott: "City dwellers reading *Heartwork* will find new motivation for packing their bags and heading to the country, where they will be rewarded with a cultural experience probably unlike any they have had before."<sup>5</sup> *Ozco News* is full of this kind of self-congratulatory hype, despite the fact that this is supposed to be an informational publication for the arts profession. It's one thing for the Australia Council to be funding bland public entertainments such as a Beanie Festival in Alice Springs or an 'A-Maze-ing Labyrinth' in Mallecoota [just two examples of the 'excellent creative output' being celebrated in *Heartwork*], but quite another for it to be acting as their publicist.

Educational institutions, the ABC, and public-funded arts organisations could, if they were brave enough, challenge the destructive alliance between politics and commerce – not with the aim of banishing the market, or even of ignoring it, but simply in order to offer some alternatives: to remind the neo-liberal economists of their place, to impress upon them their ignorance and lack of understanding, thereby lessening their power.

In the mid 1980s, as a member of the Visual Arts/Craft Board, I suggested that, as well as providing assistance to artists, we could be doing more to develop audiences. I'm sure I wasn't the only one to think of this, but in any case audience development has since become something of an Australia Council preoccupation. What I was thinking of however, were programs that would help individuals to develop their powers of discrimination, to encourage their patience and perseverance, to increase their knowledge and their powers of self-reflection. Audience development as it is now understood is almost the direct opposite of this. It is not concerned with individuals, only with the masses. Nor is it especially interested in the quality or depth of people's experiences [except, perhaps, as a by-product, in much the same way that Kellogg's is interested in whether we like the taste of their Cornflakes], but only with measurable quantities. Instead of wanting to make our lives richer, it aims only to make the arts industry wealthier.

There are things we can do. The first, I would suggest, is to change the language we use: to reclaim the rhetoric. Instead of catering to the fatuous demands of politicians and bureaucrats for bigger audiences, more popularity, more 'accessibility', more fun for all the family – which are entirely commercially-driven concerns – we can be doing more to educate politicians about real human values, or at the very least we can rub their noses in their own awful mediocrity. Mr. Abbott's sneering references to 'intellectual elites' reveal a chink in his armour. Instead of being cowed by his contempt, we might regard it as an opportunity.

If we want to talk about developing audiences for art, we need to stop thinking in terms of 'the masses' and start thinking about developing individuals' ability and willingness to think deeply and seriously, freeing their natural powers of connoisseurship, discrimination and judgement, their capacity for self-reflection. We need to foster a *love* for art, as distinct from the brief infatuation the market demands. It might begin with simple gestures of resistance such as galleries and art journals organising a statistics boycott by refusing to gather or supply attendance or sales figures on the basis that they are irrelevant. If everyone

did it, the bean-counters would be left high and dry. Just imagine the panic it would cause.

It's often said that we have to speak the language politicians and business people understand – the language of statistics; sales figures, press coverage, profit and loss statements, SWOT analyses and so on – the measurable, the comparable and the assessable. Well, sometimes. But it's the coward's way out. It yields to their power and assumes [wrongly] that we have none. It's even more important to speak a language they don't understand because, although they pretend to ignore it, it scares the life out of them. It's the language of richness, not the language of wealth.

There was a letter to the editor in the *Hobart Mercury* recently complaining about a public meeting at which the director of Forestry Tasmania, Evan Rolley, faced critics of the woodchipping industry. "Questioned repeatedly about the activities of Forestry Tasmania," wrote the correspondent, "Mr Rolley patiently responded with charts, figures and legal points. The audience talked values, but Mr Rolley talked business". In fact, that's all Mr. Rolley could talk. That's his world. That's how he deals with life. Yet, only a week or two later, we had some visiting arts marketing guru telling Tasmanian artists that, if they wanted to succeed, they'd have to form alliances with businesses such as Forestry Tasmania. Commercial success, perhaps – money in the pocket – but is that what we really think art is all about? Furthermore, do we really think that the character or the quality of the art being produced will remain unaffected by such alliances?

The big mistake – and it's one the Australia Council, politicians and arts bureaucrats make all the time – is to believe that if we just continue to talk about business, the values will somehow look after themselves. They won't. Artists are capable of expressing values, of extolling richness rather than wealth and if the Australia Council really wants to serve their interests it will encourage them in this, leaving the promotion of their careers to the commercial world, which is so much better qualified to do it.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame*, UK: Harvill Press, 1996: 100

<sup>2</sup> Peter Timms, *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?* Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003: 12–13

<sup>4</sup> *The Mercury*, Hobart, 20 June, 2004

<sup>5</sup> *Ozco News: the Australia Council Newsletter*, Issue 7, June 2004