



WHAT'S WRONG WITH CONTEMPORARY ART?

PETER TIMMS

IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE [VOL 33 NO 4] *BROADSHEET* INVITED ROBERT COOK, ASSOCIATE CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, TO RESPOND TO PETER TIMMS' RECENT BOOK *WHAT'S WRONG WITH CONTEMPORARY ART?* [UNSW PRESS, 2004]. THIS IS THE SECOND INVITED RESPONSE, FROM MARY LOU PAVLOVIC OF PAVMODERN.

PAVMODERN IS A FLOATING MUSEUM, A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT BETWEEN MELBOURNE ARTIST MARY LOU PAVLOVIC – WHO BROUGHT MATTHEW COLLINGS [2002, 2003] AND JAKE CHAPMAN [2004] TO AUSTRALIA – AND MODULAR PEOPLE [THAT HOUSES THE SUCCESSFUL MODULAR RECORDS]. PAVLOVIC STATES THAT PAVMODERN'S AIM IS TO WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE VISIONARY AND/OR CONTROVERSIAL AND TO PROVIDE A CRITIQUE OF MUSEUM CULTURE – HER MAJOR CONCERNS BEING THE DUMBING DOWN OF ART IN MUSEUMS AND INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS OF RECENT YEARS, THE SECTOR'S ATTEMPTS TO ATTRACT WIDER AUDIENCES AND HOW ARTISTS ARE DEALING WITH THESE PROBLEMS.

HMMMM... MORALITY, MONEY, METONYMY, METAPHOR

MARY LOU PAVLOVIC

The other night I was dreaming – I had to get my essay handed in to uni, the deadline looming and I hadn't started. Roaming round town with my husband, who'd finished his, I decided to leave and go to the house of a contemporary art museum curator. There I thought, I could sit quietly and get the work done. Her house was dark and scary, but she let me in. I had just sat down at the kitchen table to start writing, when she strode in and boomed, "Mary Louise, let me show you how I speak." Then she picked up this smelly dead rat, put it in her mouth sideways and sculpted it into the shape of her lips. AAAAAAH! I woke with my heart pounding. Later, I told Matthew Collings about it on the phone. He was really grossed out. "Jee-sus! That sounds like the Blair Witch Project!" he said.

Afterwards, I read Peter Timms' book, *What's Wrong With Contemporary Art?* In the final chapter, 'What Can Art Do?' arty human-animal monsters terrorising people in dreams are discussed. Timms refers to Patricia Piccinini's literal sculptures of a pig-human mum with suckling babes from *The Young Family* [2002]. He hopes they give children the nocturnal heebie-jeebies. He was frightened at night as a child himself – after seeing George Stubbs' painting of a lion attacking a horse at the National Gallery of Victoria, in Melbourne.

He thinks these images are powerful, because they tap into collective unconscious fears and myths about the suppression of animal aspects of human nature – the beast within. They can elicit a moral response. Lions devouring horses have acted as metaphors to depict human strength [lion] over weakness [horse]. They've acted as warnings associated with technological progress, [horse, civilisation, lion, Brute Nature]. Piccinini's pig-humans induce a visceral response, and have been interpreted as a warning against the moral dangers of interfering with nature.

Today, I'd feel silly embracing essential human nature and morality. Not mentioning texts that deconstruct a nature versus culture binary, concluding human activity is a part of Nature. Or Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*¹ – that examines the construction of bodies in the western imagination. Recently,

western thinkers have accepted the limitations of post-structural thinking around the body [eg. self is only a prior set of discourses] and theorised how the body matters.² Human pain, disease and so on have provided platforms to articulate ethical positions.

Hey, enough already. I'm a 'creative'. I have licence to play! It's my historical right to re-invest an emptied out signifier with new meaning. So, let me tell you: the dream-terrorist, Art-Rat-Woman, is a prophetess of doom... The warning she carries in the gloom-infested land of the unconscious is that something is morally wrong with Australian contemporary art. Beware!

It's 5am. I'm snoring, tossing and turning. Worse, Lady Rat approaches, whispering into the cold light of day, "Morality: a word rarely used today in the art world, as people interact in public institutions, commercial galleries and artist run spaces. The power scramble is largely unmonitored and undignified."

Not sure why there was no interview process for Artistic Director at the new Australian Centre for Contemporary Art [Melbourne]; the Board preferring to appoint. Nobody batted a public eyelid. Or why the NGV made a sickly, glorifying exhibition, *The Spirit of Football*³ sponsored by football loving publishers, when several women at the same time reported sexual assault by footballers; no convictions were made.

There's plenty of 'caring' art in the flashy museums though. Much literal and vacuous – lightly entertaining the masses trotting in on Sundays. Anthony Gardner finds the activism vague in NGV exhibition *Living Together is Easy*, a show that cited anxieties after 9/11 as a premise.⁴ He finds some work fashionably yuppie angst, advertised if not explored. If the art's popular, [unchallenging intellectually, aesthetically or politically] attendance will be high, and recurring gallery funding guaranteed by the Australia Council – who rate broad art audiences a measure of success.

Listen, troubled sleeper, Timms critiques art popularisation/marketing.⁵ It's fantastic someone here does publicly. Matthew Collings, who he claims is so vacuous, also discusses populism/art in depth. He's been tackling these problems for years. Popularity and emptiness are beginning to emerge as the real problems of art, the real dangers, the horrors of it... the drive with the new enormous globetrotting professional structures of contemporary art... seems to be one of keeping out the barbarians precisely by letting them in, by making things easy for them.⁶

When we do hear the word 'moral', it's childish and overly PC. Art Schools introducing ethics committees for risky student projects.⁷ Artshub refusing to reproduce Chapman's *Fuckface* image: "Sorry, we've readers of all ages."⁸ Too bad the *Good Weekend* [magazine] printed it.⁹ The Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks, advising Melbourne City Council to determine what constitutes art when a student makes a public artwork about the Palestinians.¹⁰ *Pictura Britannica* claiming to be a survey of trends in 1990s British art.¹¹ No YBAs however, as we're told in *Artspeak* they're money-grubbing, publicity seeking egomaniacs – fakes. The landmark British exhibition, *Sensation*, dropped by the National Gallery of Australia due to "museum ethics".¹² The NGV closing Andres Serrano's exhibition as Christians demonstrate against his work *Piss Christ*.¹³

All this fake, condescending [surface] morality, combined with a genuinely parochial thug-eat-thug mentality for power in daily art life here, [behind the scenes] reveals a stark and glaring immorality.

And that, you bloody snorer... Hey! Could you tone it down a bit? I'm trying to speak here! And that is the failure of many publicly funded arts institutions to exercise their duty of care to artists and the public. My daytime hero, Carol Becker says,

*The work of artists has always been to regenerate the imagination. When the ideas have been absorbed into the culture and lost their edge, artists introduce more new ideas. In a society seeking sameness and assimilation, while fleeing its most painful secrets, creative people are inevitably marginalised or punished for fulfilling this expectation. Artists often raise the questions society seeks to mask and in doing so provoke its ire. If artists are willing to engage issues of sexuality, ethnic identity, racism, gender, history – personal and collective – alienation and despair, when others are not, then of course they will appear to oppose those for whom repression of such concerns is a way of life.*¹⁴

Surely the role of our art institutions is to support the critical practices of artists, not to be those who repress artists' concerns as a way of life. Or those who mislead and ultimately alienate the public by presenting only the safer versions of what artists do. Peter Timms claims public scandals are part of artist attention-grabbing strategies. Not so in Australia – tough stuff is cringefully and parochially no-go. His book subtly and blatantly calls for more morality, socially and in art production and consumption. He refers to the philosopher Matthew Elton,¹⁵ who says the fact that we are askers and givers of reasons leads us to care about right and wrong, whether we can find them or not. Timms feels the trick is to know where to look and how to conduct the search. Dear me. Yes, well we're united with Elton, if not on theatricalised essentialised brands of bottled morality that wafts up from Timms' pages.

Timms says the market is his book's primary concern.¹⁶ He consistently discusses the art world's preoccupation with marketing, targeting the Australia Council's requirements for popularisation as a major culprit in the 'what's wrong with art' war. He's suspicious that artists tailor work for wedge. The craziest example: artists converting to sculpture because of big new sculpture prizes! Artists fall in love with art, not money – it's astonishingly simple. When I studied at Goldsmiths College



in London, their selection process was canny. Everyone who did the course had an art do or die mentality. That's all you need.

I know, let's use the Internet. Damn! What's this, the phone's been cut off! Trudge to phone box, [raining and cold today]. Ring gallery to see if wealthy collector paid for work sold two months ago. Gallery: no. And no, gallery hasn't paid for work bought six months ago, but my gallery kindly offer advance, thank God. Shrivel, feeling pesky.

Why do people think works of art exist in a different system of exchange to the rest of the world? Is it a hangover from the artist as rich dandy days? Or artist as beyond worldly needs days? Or abuse of power. Wish artists could apply similar logic to people we pay to help make the stuff – a lot. Practice pressure can demand full time commitment plus from us.

We're home. Cheque post. Lady re-materialised on shoulder. Invited to exhibit interstate. Three weeks' work involved, fee \$100. Flight paid, accommodation not. Postcard from friend whose work is in the Biennale – had to leave press conference to attend court hearing over unpaid rent.

Australia Council news waffle. The Visual Arts National Enquiry – we're the poorest Australian arts practitioners. Eyebrows rise: Australia Council gives \$200,000 to tour *Cats* around Australia. *Cats* received major sponsorship from Cadbury! I saw it! When the dancing cockroaches come on stage, they've Cadbury's logos on their wings!

Full circle, back to computer to write about market effects on artistic production. Stare dumbly at screen. Stuff this, readers, we need a break from this silly day. Let's visit a friend, a leading Australian artist.

Friend's desperate to recoup \$20 loan, no money to feed kids, or buy Christmas presents. Yearly sessional teaching job – finished. Artists not considered lecturers by art-school-cum-university, just demonstrators. Base rate of pay twenty dollars an hour compared to sixty dollars an hour for lecturers. No casual loading for artist mum over festive season. Wait, who's that at the window? Wow! It's Carol Becker! Quick, open it, what's she saying?

*In my category under 'Artists as Public Intellectuals', I quote Edward Said, "My argument is that intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching or appearing on television." I add to this the most obvious historical form of 'representing' – the use of images in multiple forms of art making to re-present conscious reality or dreams... I see in the younger generation of artists I meet a desire to seek autonomy, not to be infantilised.*¹⁷

I know, I'll call mum from a friend's house to again cadge twenty dollars. Mum – yes. Problem solved. Over coffee, we wonder why Peter Timms' book didn't acknowledge that parents are the major sponsors of the art world. Art is a cottage industry for most artists, rising from sheer passion. Australia traditionally funds visual arts through conservative PC government arts bodies. Timms correctly adds preoccupation with cheesy marketing in the current bureaucratic mix. Australia deplores artists. Artists should become more entrepreneurial – anything to get away from cheese-factors and people that

hate you! Capitalism has been behind the most radical forms of conceptual art, how else does art come to international attention? This need not lead to dumbness for accessibility. The current challenge is to create sophisticated art that sells, in a climate hyping the lowbrow.¹⁸

People! It's darkening up, we're hurtling towards midnight, where Rat Lady reverts to epic proportions.

Timms' book makes excellent points. The importance of aesthetic resolution in art and the proliferation of bad and boring video. Tragedy – funding bodies prefer marketing to education. Questioning relevance to critical debate of many 'official' Australian contemporary artworks. Questioning derivative and/or unresolved nature of lots, shamefully promoted as 'innovative' by authorities. Questioning idea that painting is dead [this isn't the '80s you know]. I'm so grateful someone went public.

The following, however, is my line drawn in Australian sand. Boundaries, the word for 2005. Timms frequently discusses the difference between metonymy and metaphor. Metonymy crap, metaphor good [Correction: naïve Romantic metaphor good]. Timms thinks art should be more 'poetic' and 'Romantic' [experiential] and less allegorical [knowledgeable]. Shudder.

Metonymy: the substitution of a word/image/object referring to an attribute for the thing that is meant. Example used: skeleton – sign for death.

Metaphor: word, image or phrase applied to object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply resemblance. Example: Rat Lady minus irony, implying corruption of establishment. Plus irony she's knowingly romantic. Light, a position philosopher Simon Critchley develops as a response to philosophical and political disappointment.¹⁹

The trouble today with using metaphors is they're plain cheesy. More cheese. The enemy of art is cheese. You feel the artist's trying too hard, faking. Worldly anxieties that many artists share are too terrible to aestheticise into palatable metaphors. We've deconstructed sentimental metaphors. Get out and stay out. Metonymy insists on understanding the way artists use signs. It's a discipline. For me this is as fundamental as poetry and Romanticism is to Timms. Art's the investigation of collective subjectivities towards signs. Both continually renew themselves.

Using skeletons as death signifiers is fair. They can operate in excess of literalness; there may be hosts of metaphorical associations in the artist's applications. Good conceptual art is always made with feeling, that's what drives artists. We care. It's ludicrous of Timms to suggest metonymy



is purely puzzle-solving. Check Sarah Lucas' *Self-portrait with skull* [1997] and tell me that's a work that isn't passionate about life. And death. Sexuality. The trappings of material gain. Politics. Formal resolution. All exercised with restraint. No glimmers of sentimentality.

Many artists express romantic ideals today without metaphors. Matthew Collings TV show, *Hello Culture*, addresses this. The anti-establishment stance of BANK, or the indulgent photographs of drug-fucked youth by Corinne Day are romantic.

Betchya two bucks these artists would rather be caught dead than making metaphoric poetic art.

Timms waxes lyrical about Antony Hamilton's, *Hung White Fox*. Finding the play between hanging spotlight dead albino fox and its moving shadow suggesting triumph over death. I see a moving shadow of an animal that remains dead. The albino fox is undeniably compelling. Hamilton alters the conventional way we see the real thing, hey presto, metaphoric

associations. It's disappointingly melodramatic though. Spotlights, shadows are clichés that cheaply signify life-and-death-in-art-installation.

Timms draws deep breath and pompously bags Ceal Floyer's work, mocking her garbage bags filled with air.²⁰ She's known for subtle, elegant constructions using mundane materials, imbuing the banal with humour and genuine imagination. Funny, her video, *Butterfly Effect* [1998], follows a white butterfly travelling around Berlin. The work amongst other things, evokes ideas around nature and culture as does Hamilton's work. Simply – no clichés. Timms thinks Hamilton's work suggests that earthly existence is cruel, unpredictable, but can be redeemed by poetry [dancing shadows]. Floyer suggests that existence is cruel, unpredictable, and poetry? Well.

It's never going to change that. Yawn. It's late. Goodnight. Don't let Rat Lady bite.

Notes

¹ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, New York: Routledge, 1990

² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, New York: Routledge Press, 1993

³ *The Spirit of Football*, National Gallery of Victoria, August – October 2004. From NGV website, "*The Spirit of Football* challenges our perception of Australia's leading sport. Twenty Australian artists have been invited to contribute their interpretation of what football means to them. The exhibition is a collaborative event between the NGV and Geoff Slattery Publishing, the publisher of many books and magazines about Australian Football." No works in this exhibition challenged football. The winning artist was awarded \$40,000

⁴ Anthony Gardner, 'Living Together is Easy', *Broadsheet*, Vol 33 No 4, 2004

⁵ Peter Timms, 'Worshipping Things', *Broadsheet*, Vol 33 No3, 2004

⁶ Matthew Collings and Mary Lou Pavlovic, *The Solemn and the Trivial versus the Serious and the Playful*, Melbourne, 2002: 7

⁷ In 2002 The School of Art, Victorian College of the Arts, introduced an ethics committee to monitor student projects

⁸ In February 2004 as Australian representative for Jake Chapman, Artshub contacted me about their feature on Jake and Dinos' work saying it was against their policy to publish penises and swear words as they have readers of all ages. They requested I supply alternative images. This was for the article by Jake Chapman that appeared in Artshub 28 February, 2004

⁹ Amruta Slee, 'Jake Chapman, FYI', *The Good Weekend: The Age and Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March, 2004

¹⁰ Gabriella Coslovic, 'The Politics of Art', *The Age*, 14 May, 2004

¹¹ Bernice Murphy, *Pictura Britannica* [catalogue], Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997

¹² Brian Kennedy, 'How Much Do We Care About Museum Ethics?' <http://www.nga.gov.au/Director/museethics.htm>

¹³ Rita Piteri, 'The Andres Serrano Controversy', <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~twf/serrano.html>

¹⁴ Carol Becker, *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and the Changing Politics of Art*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002: 6

¹⁵ Matthew Elton, 'Choice Products', *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 March 2003: 25

¹⁶ Peter Timms, *Worshipping Things*

¹⁷ Carol Becker, op cit: 14

¹⁸ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002

¹⁹ Simon Critchley, *Very Little, Almost Nothing*, London: Routledge, 1997

²⁰ Peter Timms, *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?* Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003: 88

Opposite page: Ceal Floyer, *Butterfly Effect* [video still], 1998
Photo courtesy Lisson Gallery, London
Left and below: Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Fuckface*, 1966
Photos courtesy Whitecube, London

