



ADAM GECZY

I HATE AUSTRALIA

Canberra Contemporary Art Space
ccas.com.au
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Along the back wall of the Gorman House exhibition space, the text *I HATE AUSTRALIA* is painted in huge orange capital letters. On an adjoining wall a pathetic mockery of the Australian flag is projected—back to front and with the colours reversed, so that the blue field is orange, the white stars black, the red-white-and-blue of the Union Jack now green-black-and-orange. On the next wall, a floor-to-ceiling blackboard bears the text “I must learn to love my country” scrawled dozens of times as if a punishment administered to a recalcitrant Australian version of Bart Simpson. At the other end of the gallery, a video projection shows a backyard swimming pool in a luxury waterside suburb. And in front of the swimming pool is a faintly warm barbecue on which sweating sausages gradually take on the consistency of dry, rotten wood. At the entrance to this charged environment is a plinth with a selection of permanent markers and a wall on which visitors are invited to scrawl the single word, “Sorry”.

None of this appears to be subtle or complex or even particularly clever. Instead, Adam Geczy’s exhibition parades its aesthetic and rhetorical crudity as self-reflexive evidence of the poverty of artistic expression in a culture that has reduced public discourse to the terms of George Bush’s ultimatum—if you’re not with us, you’re against us. On these terms and on the basis of the 2004 Australian election, Geczy declares himself ‘against us’. An artist’s statement displayed opposite the “Sorry” wall and published in the previous issue of *Broadsheet*, outlines with passionate rage the reasons why Geczy ‘hates’ Australia—mediocrity, anti-intellectualism, political complacency, gutless conformism, self-centred materialism, selective historical amnesia, callous indifference to the oppression of its ‘others’.

Many Australians [even some of those who voted for Howard; even some within the Howard government] would acknowledge many items in Geczy’s catalogue of charges against our country and our government. But many, I suspect, would stop short at using the word “hate”, or declaring “I hate Australia” with the categorical, siren-whooping, state-of-emergency rhetoric that is the one clear note of Geczy’s installation. Why?

In a thoughtful response to this exhibition, Australian National University School of Art lecturer Gordon Bull suggested that there is

something pathological in an Australian citizen saying with conviction “I hate Australia”, akin to saying “I hate myself”. “But I do think”, Bull writes, “that Adam Geczy really is suggesting that there is a disease to be addressed and his use of the phrase is something like rhetorical surgery. It’s like a scalpel cutting into a sick body”.¹ Bull goes on to discuss how the Howard government’s notorious ‘wedge politics’ has effectively harnessed political dissent to its own purposes, skilfully converting the outrage of its opponents into political and cultural capital. Media populism has effectively whipped up fear and distrust of dissident opinions which are contemptuously dismissed as cultural elitism, while Australia’s real cultural elites—big business, media and sport—get on with business as usual. Thus Bull asks, “When

dissent can be managed, virtually farmed by what it opposes, how is it possible to dissent effectively?”

This neatly defines the artistic, political and intellectual questions opened up by Geczy’s exhibition—what role can there be for political art in such an environment? Geczy’s work is an interesting study in a deliberate impoverishment of means. Logically, it consists of simple reversals—love/hate; white/black. Aesthetically, it consists of short, crude outbursts of expression. Rhetorically, it appears to deliver its declarations with the self-confirming sincerity of rage. This impoverishment seems to signal a culture in which subtlety is suspect, in which irony is no longer allowed. But of course, as Geczy writes, “Art trafficks in abstractions; even its most ostensibly direct, blanket statements have an ironic edge to them that can be linked to a dozen other, less clear-cut ideas”.

So you get mixed messages, flip-flops of irony and literalism, love and hate. The ‘barbie’ and the swimming pool are heavily sarcastic, pathetic trophies purchased by a trade-in on other freedoms. But if these are ironic, is the “Sorry” wall also? And if “I Hate Australia” is sincere, is “I must learn to love my country” also in earnest? Irony is often thought of as cool, detached; but this kind of irony is different, served up on a sizzling hotplate of emotion. But it is an outrage that finds it impossible to express itself candidly. Perhaps this is the most disturbing effect of Geczy’s exhibition—its articulation of an emotion that declares itself as ‘hate’, because in the ultimatum of with-us or against-us, ‘love’ has already been co-opted by conservative populist nationalism.

Note

¹ Gordon Bull, unpublished paper presented at a forum on political art at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 7 May 2005

Above: Adam Geczy, detail of “Sorry” wall, 2005
Below: installation view, 2005
Photos courtesy the artist

