

IT'S JUST LIKE SAYING "INDEFENDABLE"

the art life

"...it's just like saying 'the good life'".

All in The Numbers III

Wednesday, June 27, 2007

Numbers: The final episode of *The Art Life* TV show went to air last night. We logged a very respectable 205,000 viewers, down from ep 2 but with an average of 253,000 viewers per episode. So how did we stack up against the rest of the field?

SBS's *Sugar Town: The Bridegrooms* attracted 140,000 viewers after being picked in the program guides of the Fairfax press as the doco of the night. Ha ha! [One reader noted we were lucky not have been up against *Wilfred* on SBS, but hey, we'd have made that puppy our bitch as well...] Overall, TEN took out the time slot with 976,000 viewers watching *Numb3rs*, *Crossing Jordan* had 769,000 on Network Seven while *The Nation* on Nine had 575,000 people watching.



Feedback: Some of the feedback we've been getting has taken us to task over a perceived Sydney bias in the artists we included in the series. In reality however, such a claim doesn't really stack up. There were 10 artists from Sydney, 7 from Melbourne and 4 from elsewhere:

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It once used Sydney art critic John McDonald's quote of "pretentious and pseudo-serious" as a promotional tool on its weblog, although this was most likely made up as it also promoted the fact that it was "at least half right fifty-percent of the time". Such comic genius has not been seen in Australian art commentary since the 1980s when a group of artists published *Art and a Texta*, a parody of the then vanguard and influential magazine *Art and Text*.

The Art Life, the Sydney-based weblog, has come a long way since 2004, the ambition of the team showing its humble beginnings by this quote from its site: "As the visibility of The Art Life increases we seem to be attracting a lot of attention from quarters of the art world we never thought would take notice of our activities".¹ For those who missed it, the ABC recently screened a three-part self-titled television series written and produced by The Art Life and presented by one of its staffers, Andrew Frost.

The series began with: "We're taking a tour of contemporary Australian art; we're looking at what it means and why it matters. We're in a melancholy mood because we're looking at the beauty and the sadness of the world",² and then didn't proceed beyond that. We were left with an overview of white Australian art loosely bracketed into three categories—art and the suburbs; too many images in the world (and that Sony ad with the bouncing balls in San Francisco as a metaphor for visual culture); and painting isn't dead, it's just smarter now because of its own history. The intention of this text is neither to deride or criticise the series. That seems to have been eloquently done by those who lie at the heart of The Art Life's roots—the anonymous commentators found on the blog. Here is the evidence for my analysis of this three-part series, an Australian art bloggers version of *Fight Club*, its usual suspects caught in a sparring match of attack and defence on behalf of their master(s). Attacks as scathing as: "Your ambition wrote a cheque that your intellect couldn't cash".³ Or "Hear, hear! and its not even democratic (or democratised) it's totally 'us' and 'them' as in 'here I am an ART person talking about the suburbs and all these people living here have no idea about any of this... aren't I clever.' How patronising."⁴

Of course, this is all defensible by claiming limitations such as "having to address a particular audience". But then, postings on the blog from The Art Life management counter any concerns by claiming: "It may come as surprise to you Angry (Angry is not a fan of the show), but we were not under any obligation to do anything other than what we wanted to do, ie. choose the artists we liked regardless of where they came from, for inclusion in the show. Having said that, it may also surprise you—if you can see through your anger—that of the artists featured throughout the three episodes, it was an exact fifty-fifty split between Sydney and Melbourne."

Such statistics could warm the cockles of the whitest of white-breads. The Art Life seemed to want to be a critic, to capture or label a particular period style, but this couldn't be successfully achieved within such a format—so consequently a battle between scholarship and schoolboy sarcasm surfaced.

A question also emerged—was The Art Life (blog) alienating its audience by taking up the medium of television? How did The Art Life go from 'we' to 'me'? This text is not directed towards critiquing a television show nor an assessment of its medium—rather, an analysis of a set of symptoms that reflects the emergence of undesirable conditions in the local art world.

In his 2003 published dissertation on critical internet culture, Geert Lovink flagged, "The Ownership Question", or, who is the owner of the content? And to reshape this question slightly for my own purposes, who is the owner of the ideas, criticism and assessment posted on The Art Life over the past few years and to what extent did the 'democratic' nature of the blog provide/influence the content of the step up to television? Lovink argued that although the blog emerged from an idealistic democratic publishing culture, they are in fact—and he quotes (programmer and computer guru) Eric Raymond—"enlightened dictatorship(s)".⁵ Seems simple enough, but what happens when the enlightened dictator becomes a television commentator and the thoughts, positions and sarcasm of his followers are appropriated for the opposite of good? To quote Eric Raymond: "They (the owners) are not benevolent because the people are somehow better, but because their leadership is based almost exclusively on their ability to convince others to follow. Thus the means of coercion are very limited. Hence a dictator who is no longer benevolent, ie. who alienates his or her followers, loses the ability to dictate."⁶

To compound the confusion for The Art Life's audience, after the (three-part) series Andrew Frost further appeared in an adjunct episode to give the uninitiated a brief guided tour of the Venice Biennale and report on the six Australian artists participating in this year's program. "Every two years we send artists to the Venice Biennale and every two years we have exactly the same worries—are we any good, do we send the right artists to Venice, do they really represent us?" The predictable 'world cup of art' clichés then followed. "It seems like Australia is more like the Socceros—plucky triers occasionally sending someone up to the big league." What exactly did this mean? Was he trying to be funny? Such comments are symptomatic of a larger whinging local art world, one that thrives on complaining, anti-intellectualism and ridicule. It reinforces for the non-art going public the possibility that the contemporary art world does have its head up its own arse and is made up exclusively of paranoid, elitist victims.

Watching this particular Venice report reminded me of a podcast interview with (international curator, writer and critic) Francesco Bonami, who stated that Australian art was bad, if not the worst in the world. He also stated that even Canadian art was better than Australian art:

Australian artists are still very bad... I mean you can't see Australian art from that far away. The differences still exist... mostly among bad things. You can't figure it out... someone where he comes from, you know? Of course you can still find places where the artistic creative production is still related to the locality, the regional position of the people, or where they are you know.⁷

Bad-boy blogger now Auntie's favourite



My point here is in part provided by an Art Life reader: "Why bother attempting Venice in twenty minutes if you couldn't make a thorough cohesive assessment that actually contributes to the coverage"⁸ (mirroring my point regarding Bonami's comments, which are both incoherent and nonsensical). This contributes to the problem of Australian art and art criticism being indefensible; that is to say, nothing is being said, there is nothing to defend. But once again all this is defensible by the writers and presenters, and in the instance of the Venice report it was as easy as this—"The Art Life was not involved with the Venice documentary."⁹ No one was accountable here and now, even in the most accountable of all media formats—all claims for accountability were negligible courtesy of the anonymous dictatorship.

This begs the question, has Andrew Frost strategically used the 'democratic' life/beginnings of The Art Life blog to further his own career, and will the other Art Life staffers come out and let us all know what they think about this? At the same time one might also consider the difficulties Frost encountered as the presenter. As the public face of The Art Life, he had to present the observations of a group of arty types hiding behind the anonymity of their blog, presenting him with meaningless grand claims such as, "we live in spectacular times, our culture is built on images." I suppose it is conceivable that for those who spend a great part of their lives on the internet, this kind of observation about contemporary art could be a revelation and something to be considered interesting. But for others this level of insight is symptomatic of so-called 'discourse' on Australian art. Maybe it is symptomatic of internet culture—something like this: "I admire people who watch a show, hate it, then take the time to waste more of their time by going to this blog and leaving a message about how they wasted their time watching the show."¹⁰

But here also emerges a gap in my argument. If the anonymous The Art Life arty types were writing such drivel for Frost to present on television, and apparently having nothing to do with the Venice episode ("The Art Life was not involved with the Venice documentary"),¹¹ how then did we get the similarly toned facetious comments from Frost, such as this on British artist Tracey Emin: "If you want to ask how much these etchings are, you can't afford them." Such coincidences resonated. To quote Eric Raymond once again: "They (the owners) are not benevolent because the people are somehow better, but because their leadership is based almost exclusively on their ability to convince others to follow." How these anonymous types convinced Frost to be the public face of this series is uncertain, but what it did achieve was to obligate

Opposite: screengrab, <http://artlife.blogspot.com/2007/06/all-in-numbers-iii.html>
Left: Screengrab of television's latest talking-head Andrew Frost, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/tv--radio/badboy-blogger-now-auntys-favourite/2007/06/07/1181089238764.html>

The Art Life management to clearly outline its stance: "First of all, the 'anonymity issue' was never an issue for us because we knew that at some point in the future that question would eventually answer itself. And so it has. It leaves us in the rather unusual and somewhat unexpected position of many people knowing who we are, yet we don't know who you are. Ah, the irony!"¹²

If The Art Life television series was not simply a parochial survey of the Australian artworld, where then was international art situated? With regular national international exhibitions in spaces ranging from museums to artist-run-spaces, how then is international art not part of the Australian art life? And indigenous art and culture—urban or desert, it wasn't represented. If this indefensible view of contemporary Australian art is symptomatic of a greater white conservatism in national culture, should we then not be ignoring it, or do I, along with many of my peers, have my head stuck up my own arse so far that I can't see the fun in just making lite art TV?

Notes

¹ The Art Life, 'This Just In', posted Tuesday, 21 September, 2004

² Andrew Frost, presenter The Art Life, ABC TV, July 2007

³ www.artlife.blogspot.com, anonymous comment posted by 'keith urbane', 29 June 2007, 2:48 pm

⁴ Anonymous comment posted on ABC Message Board, 14 June 2007, 11:31:46pm, <http://www2b.abc.net.au/tmb/Client/Message.aspx?b=81&m=33&ps=20&dm=1&pd=3>

⁵ Geert Lovink, *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition*, V2_Publishing/NAi Publishers, Rotterdam, 2003: 244

⁶ Eric Raymond, 'Homesteading the Noosphere', www.tuxedo.org/~ers/writings/cathedral-bazaar/homesteading/x349.html, in *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition*, V2_Publishing/NAi Publishers, Rotterdam, 2003: 286

⁷ 'Bad at Sports', podcast interview with Francesco Bonami

⁸ Anonymous comment posted on The Art Life weblog, comments, 18 July 2007, 1:01 am, <http://www.haloscan.com/comments/nesbitt/927038995504409610/>

⁹ The Art Life management post on The Art Life weblog, comments, 24 July 2007, 10:47 am, <http://www.haloscan.com/comments/nesbitt/927038995504409610/>

¹⁰ Anonymous comment posted on The Art Life weblog, comments, 19 July 2007, 11:43 am, <http://www.haloscan.com/comments/nesbitt/927038995504409610/>

¹¹ The Art Life management post on The Art Life weblog, comments, 24 July 2007 10:47 am, <http://www.haloscan.com/comments/nesbitt/927038995504409610/>

¹² The Art Life post, 'Mission Statement', Thursday, 26 July 2007