





## RICHARD GRAYSON

As David Hockney has become more and more upset about the smoking ban in England, he has got into the habit of dashing off letters to newspapers with a slightly unhinged regularity. These bemoan the operations of the nanny-State, political correctness gone mad, and use of other phrases drawn from the lexicon of right wing complaint to describe this outrageous attempt to control his humble democratic pleasure of a well-earned gasper. So it was no particular surprise to open the paper a few weeks back to see under his signature another letter starting with the lines “The no-smoking policy in mental health institutions is outright cruelty, imposed by an unthinking and blind political elite.” But then Hockney headed off fast down an expected track. He wrote: “I told a friend I had been to a house in Lincolnshire, where in three rooms there must have been pictures of a few hundred naked children and a lot of naked adults as well.” In writing this he relinquished his usual role as the grumpiest man in Yorkshire to return momentarily to the gold lamé blond bombshell of the sexual and social liberations of the 1960s, (referred to as “permissiveness” in the lexicon). He wrote that his friend looked “shocked... until I told him they were painted by Antonio Verrio between 1688 and 1698, at Burghley House in Stamford.”

Hockney was responding to an article by Mark Lawson in *The Guardian* about legislation being introduced in British parliament by the Minister of Justice that was drawn up in reaction to a recent trial in the USA. Prosecution against a paedophile had collapsed because the images of abuse in question were digital so that they could be represented by lawyers as having been made in cyberspace with imaging technology. They were therefore representations rather than real, and so could be defended under American law as being covered by the constitutional right to free expression. Although British (and Australian) law is rather less rigorous in its defence of abstract liberties than the American courts, this case did seem to bring to view a loophole that might be exploited in a court of law in order to avoid prosecution. So what the British minister proposed is a measure to imprison for up to three years those found possessing drawings or computer-generated images of child abuse. A change in law that would, Lawson wrote, “collapse the existing distinction between material showing actual abuse of actual children and simulated or imagined pictures... that would have strange consequences away from the dark distressing world of paedophiles and their victims.”

Lawson unfolded his story and Hockney fired off his letter a week after police in Sydney had attended the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery to remove Bill Henson’s photographs before his exhibition’s opening (May 2008) to see whether in their opinion, the consumptive chiaroscuro photographs of naked pale teenagers looking *fin de siècle* and decadent, contravened or broke the law. This action by ‘Sydney’s finest’ is refracted through a very Australian history of censorious wowsersism—(the) Ern Malley (affair), D.H. Lawrence, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Robert Mapplethorpe have all been made aware of the Australian policeman’s keen interest in their work—and Hockney’s letter is inflected by a more recent history of stubborn illiberalism at the heart of the British New Labour administration; but the two events seem to be different points on a continuum of concern about representations of children. As Hockney pointed out, at one time society (at least high society) was happy to cover the ceilings of grand houses with pictures of naked little pre-adolescents tumbling through the air as *putti* or playing Cupid, and to fill their gardens and public spaces with hundreds of statues of nude erotic teens as dyads and nyads, Davids or “Innocence Awakening”. Now elected leaders of countries find such representations by established artists “revolting” and people can’t take photos to the shops to be developed if they show children playing in the paddling pool, for fear that they will be reported as stalkers or kiddy fiddlers.

It is easy to see the Henson affair as an expression of an old story of the Artists and the Philistines. Although the artworld is reliably horrified at expressions of social outrage at their activities or a threat of law or ban, there is also, on a semi-submerged level, a frisson of delight. It is a foundation myth of modernism, of romanticism, that one of the artist’s functions is as a revealer of truths which outrage the brutish uncaring bourgeoisie, who in turn seek to extinguish the artist’s tender Promethean light. And the Henson brouhaha seems to prove that the old machinery is still working. An essentially comforting set of roles and actions has been set in motion that allows a return to narratives about art that are otherwise rather difficult to maintain. There has been something alarming and depressing about the hysteria and attitudes expressed in letters’ pages of newspapers and blogs on the web, which have proved again the disdain that the majority of the Australian population feels for artists and their dislike of what artists do—how they are seen as an unnatural and alien elite by the people that the artists optimistically presume to enrich and narrate. However, there has also been something particular at work here, something more complex and unexpected, which speaks of the way images are read and understood, and the way this is being changed by the electronic world.

Opposite: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said of Bill Henson’s photos, “I think they’re revolting”. Of the image on the front cover of *Art Monthly Australia*, he further said “I can’t stand this stuff”. One might wonder which of the two is the more “revolting”...

Above: Apologies to the National Gallery of Australia and David Hockney, from his series *A Hollywood Collection*, 1965



With the arrival of Freud, this devilish but attractive figure slowly found itself transmuted from an agent of sin to an agent of health, as it now seemed that only through fighting repression could the human spirit achieve fulfillment, and this belief became one of the central engines for the operations of the transformative avant-garde. The only thing that one could do was to unshackle the imagination—to live to the full, to effect a revolution of the senses. And no one was better designed to enact this agenda than artists and other outlaw imaginations. This led to strange areas, the glorification of the shenanigans of Aleister Crowley and the borrowing of the motto of the Hellfire Club—“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law” and the Surrealists raising de Sade to an exemplar of imaginative freedom. It is to state the obvious that much of this proselytising was done by men, and even within the discourses of ‘liberation’, the principles of liberation seemed to be gendered to favour the demands of testosterone—women are more the subject of the erotic imagination, to be spoken by it, rather than being allowed their own expressions. The Pleasure Principle was to have no barrier to its free expression—to contain it was to work with Thanatos, the forces of death.

These expressions took place largely in the sanctified spaces of art—the gallery, the soirée, the small pamphlet—with little obvious effect in the wider world. So as long as they didn’t frighten the ladies or the horses, Society allowed the avant-garde to get on with whatever they were doing, with only the occasional scandal or gratifying walkout at a first night performance punctuating this indifference. The space of the aesthetic operated in ways that are simultaneously liberating and containing—allowing expressions denied by the codes elsewhere and which were at the same time strangely disinfecting—the fact that it was ‘art’ meant that an expression becomes suspended, that it can’t really be obscene weird or icky. Or if they are, they are obscene weird and icky for some higher purpose, or for a class of people sophisticated enough to cope these qualities without being corrupted. After all, as chief prosecutor Mervyn Griffith Jones asked in the trial of Penguin Books for obscenity after publishing *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1959, was this the sort of book that “you would wish your wife or your servants to read”? Not that you would have known this in Australia, as the book that described this trial was itself banned.

There has been a long tradition of art objects as the ‘adult’ pictures of the upper-classes—a ‘dirty old man’-Terry Thomas-moustachio-twirling appreciation of ‘erotica’, where the *Rokeby Venus* by Velázquez is kept behind curtains in the backroom for its private ‘appreciation’ by Gentlemen (later, in 1914 when it was hung in the National Gallery, it was slashed by the suffragette Mary Richardson, to protest that it was pornography). The categorisation of an image as art however is meant to remove the images from the sticky impulses of the body, or make them rarified and distant. Were it not for this sanctified space, images such as those by Bellmer and Balthus would cause greater concern, seeming even more pathological and alarming than they do.

The 1960s, the trial of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *School Kids Oz*, *The Little Red School Book* and a thousand other cultural battles and face-offs between the alternative culture and those of the straight world ended up with a bohemianisation of western culture. Suddenly everybody got to be a *poète maudit*, doing their thing and letting it all hang out, indulging in playpower and free love. Censorship and its operations were first challenged and then made ridiculous. The approaches that had been explored in the arts went mainstream. However in contradiction to the intentions and promises of progressive practice, the revolution in signs and culture did not bring in the socio-political and human liberations that were expected. Instead it’s as if they have been stymied in the field of culture—to travel no further. The freedoms that were meant to benefit the world and to usher in a new age of association and relationship have been instead found their contemporary expression by the neo-cons of capital, and have shaped and informed the crazed markets of expression and invention that the computer and its global networks have allowed. Ideas of liberty have been taken over by libertarians. Computer technology grew out of the bohemian cultures of the 1960s and 1970s as well as the military, and the computer screen and the unlegislated spaces of the web have allowed utopian constructions of space where, “Do what thou wilt” is indeed, for a moment, “the whole of the law”. It is as if a space has been constructed where the Freudian super-ego has

There has been a long and honourable tradition of the artist as ‘sex fiend’, a role that has been enthusiastically embraced both by the disapproving wowsers world and the art world itself. This is a bohemian *épater la bourgeoisie* narrative, one which used to be about painting nudes, wearing corduroy and sleeping with the models, so siring endless children to be brought up in colourful poverty and benign neglect. It was Carravaggio, Augustus John; now perhaps Mapplethorpe with a whip inserted into his anus, Jeff Koons copulating with Cicciolina or people writing their web-casts about transgression. It is the artist as sexual outlaw, the free spirit, who was (selflessly) engaged in a journey of discovery that would take them deep into the operations of desire and travel, far beyond the narrow constraints of society.

In the nineteenth-century this figure constituted an ‘other’, who like the reputedly incestuous Byron, was Mad Bad and Dangerous to know. He represented a sinful pleasure that cut across the structures that maintained society and wealth and their bizarrely attractive activities, like those of Doctor Faustus, which were pursued at the cost of the immortal soul. We see its full flowering at the end of the nineteenth-century in Baudelaire, the poet of damnation (the *poète maudit*) who argued in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863) that vice is natural in that it is selfish, while virtue is artificial because we must restrain our natural impulses in order to be good. As he wrote in *Les Fleurs Du Mal*:

*If poison, arson, sex, narcotics, knives  
/have not yet ruined us and stitched their quick,  
/loud patterns on the canvas of our lives,  
/it is because our souls are still too sick.*



been lopped off and the psyche and the Unconscious can enjoy the free play unregarded and unseen. It is a realm that Marcuse would have adored, and which is in many ways shaped by the dreams of an avant-garde. Certainly it was speedily adopted by artists and practitioners. In these spaces the image plays supreme, and its perfect expression is that of pornography.

As the computer is in the study and the office, private or semi-private sites, this access to images has been taken up by an (wider and) ever-wider range of people, and a greater number. There is no longer a special place for them and the number of boys and men accessing porn nowadays is far greater than when men had to sneak into a 'dirty bookshop' or reach up to the higher shelves to get their fix of smut. As far back as the year 2000, in an exercise to beef up security in The White House in Washington, it was found that most of the traffic coming into the firewall (the barrier between the outside and the inside) was from hard-core porn sites downloaded by politicians, administrators and political professionals.

This trade in images has led to what Martin Amis describes as the "obscenification" of the world, which has bought with it an increasing confusion about the relationships between representation and the action. On one hand, it seems OK for young girls to wear T-shirts featuring a Playboy Bunny or bearing the text: "So many boys so little time"—here the signifier has become unanchored from sex in Hugh Hefner's hot tub. But in other

areas it has massively increased anxiety. It seems unlikely that there is a greater percentage of paedophiles in society today than there has been in the past. Child predation has always been an issue and fear in society. Indeed, the current legal age of consent is the result of attempts to protect children from exploitation by men. Up to the early part of the nineteenth-century (including the time that Hockney's frescoes of frisky naked children and adults were painted) the age of consent was twelve and it was only raised to thirteen in 1875 and then to sixteen in 1885. This setting of the modern benchmark was the direct result of a massive media campaign against child prostitution by W.T. Stead in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. His articles, known as 'The Maiden Tribute' exposed in graphic detail the entrapment, abduction and "sale" of young poor and working class girls to London brothels. Written in successive instalments, Stead's "infernal narrative", as he called it, brought into view to respectable Victorians, a criminal underworld of brothels' trade and horror that shocked society to the core and forced parliament to enact legislation.

While such operations still exist world wide in countries like England, Australia, Thailand and Russia, they also now shape the architectures of cyberspace, where their doubles and ghosts haunted by their victims, become images which are viewed and traded by those who once would have visited the child brothels of London or Sydney. And like the child brothels, the visitors to the virtual sites are from all levels of 'society'—respectable politicians, priests, administrators, doctors, vets, art historians and authors, police officers and teachers. And each time a network is revealed it seems to indicate the depth of the reach of these images into the world around us. According to Australian Federal Police Assistant Police Commissioner, Andrew Colvin, the recent May 2008 operation identified one thousand five hundred people or computers in Australia, as having made links to a particular child pornography site. After the passing of the Criminal Amendment Act in 1885, carnal knowledge of a minor was punishable with prison. Now in 2008, to possess its *representation* carries the penalty of ten years imprisonment.

Bill Henson draws on an iconography located in the early days of the bohemian world; the pale consumptive European faces, the suggestions of an opiated languor, the flesh against velvety darkness. It is all very nineteenth-century decadent, although produced in the twenty-first. However, the sanctified spaces of art, in which he is operating are increasingly atomised by other spaces that have grown from the same history and which have a far greater reach into the society in which artists work than art itself seems to have. We are living in a period that seems to be fundamentally re-imagining what an image might be and how its relationships to the real might operate. But it's a debate that seems to be largely taking place in the world that lies outside the rarified spaces of art.

Opposite page: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said of the artistic depiction of teenagers by photographer Bill Henson and the magazine *Art Monthly Australia*; "We're talking about the innocence of little children here. A little child cannot answer for themselves about whether they wish to be depicted in this way...". Hetty Johnston, founder and Executive Director of child protection organisation Bravehearts, expressed similar if not more virulent views of Henson and *Art Monthly Australia*. Is this perhaps what they both had in mind—how children should be depicted until they reach (full legal) adulthood? Refer to Tamara Winikoff, page 185. Apologies to people of the Islamic faith. Above: Caravaggio, *St. John the Baptist (Youth with Ram)*, c. 1600  
Photo courtesy Musei Capitolini, Rome