

Myopia (part 1)

By Danny Lacy

Let me firstly introduce the following short texts that are from the outset seemingly un-related, yet related by association and convergence (in my mind at least) from a general perspective of living and working in Australia at the present time. The sub-titles, 'Keeping faith with our common values' and 'United artists' succinctly elucidate the underlying dialogue at play with how a group of Australian artists (creatively linked to Sydney Non Objective) find themselves currently exhibiting at Minus Space in Brooklyn. From an Australian perspective the creation and connection of strong networks between like-minded artists has opened up opportunities and possibilities within an international context like never before. This text seeks to present and position a brief overview of some further issues currently being negotiated within a uniquely Australian context.

Keeping faith with our common values¹

1

On the 5th of March 2008 the former Primer Minister of Australia, John Howard presented the Irving Kristol lecture at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), breaking his silence after his spectacular election rout late last year. In his speech to the conservative think tank he staunchly defended his policy making, and was critical of the new Australian Labour government for planning future pathways that would irreversibly pave over his (jaundice) legacy.

A few days later Howard continued his public speaking engagements in the United States, mouthing off at Harvard, lavishing praise on the Australian - US Alliance as being "deep and rich and old"². Once again he was on the back foot³ (this time) over his decision to side with the U.S. and not sign the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the retrograde apostle of Australian conservatism continuing to sound like a whining schoolboy with no justifiable excuse for copying someone else's homework.

I can't help but think of how chance plays such an integral part in framing the outcome of history. John Howard first met the American president George Bush in Washington on September 10, 2001. The ensuing madness that followed fiercely intertwined the two leaders together in more than just ideology, solidifying a special bond of somewhat unilateral 'mateship'⁴. Perhaps not since the Second World War has the alliance between Australia and the United States been as strong.

2

In October 2007 John Howard's Liberal government introduced a mandatory citizenship test for prospective citizens wanting to reside in Australia. Following in the footsteps of the U.S. and U.K., a series of test questions were created that focused on history, political process and general knowledge of our country. Heated debate raged in the media and within the community over the relevance of some of the questions, especially certain questions that focused on ideological mythologies of Australian history, that were not necessarily realistic markers of ones ability to be a respectable citizen of Australia.

As an example, one of the test questions used on the multiple choice citizenship test was, 'Who is Australia's greatest cricketer? Is it Sir Donald Bradman, Sir Hubert Opperman or Walter Lindrum?' Undoubtedly this question caused the most uproar, and was speculated as being personally crafted by Prime Minister John Howard himself, a die-hard fan of the game of cricket. How knowing the answer to this question proves that you are worthy to be granted citizenship of

this country is absurd and insulting. There are no test questions on the American Citizen test that ask if Babe Ruth was the greatest baseball player?

The answer to the question is Sir Donald Bradman, 'The Don', who many arguably believe was the greatest Australian cricketers to ever have played the game. Bradman is an icon of the sport, and played for Australia between 1928 and 1948, dazzling and delighting fans around the world with his amazing batting skill. His statistics even today are quite remarkable⁵. The mythology of Don Bradman signifies much more than just a humble cricketer though. His legend has come to signify the working class hero, the good old days and the monocultural patriarchal conservative values of Australian society from a time before widespread modern immigration. It is exactly these ideologies that John Howard champions.

Given this context the question is quite representational of the undercurrents present in modern day conservative Australian culture. Rather than offer a subjective viewpoint of history, we are dictated to that whoever is the correct answer actually *is* the greatest Australian cricketer. The great twist to the question comes when it is revealed that the other two answers are not cricketers at all; Walter Lindrum was a World Champion Billiards player in the 1930's and Sir Hubert Opperman was a famous cycling champion in the 1920's and 30's (who co-incidentally later joined the Liberal party and was elected to Federal Parliament).

The framing of this question is an amazing insight into the ideological stalemate that our country has been paralyzed by since the late 90's, and manipulated at every opportunity by the propaganda fear machine of our past government. Is such a question really an indicator of the common values we seek to share in Australia, or the infatuation of a myopic man trapped in his own mirror image?

United Artists⁶

Nowadays, as strange as it seems, it's just as easy for a motivated artist or artists' group to organise an exhibition overseas than it is for an institution with large amounts of staff and funding. New connections bring new opportunities; new trading routes open up allowing the transfer and safe passage of goods between old international ports, Sydney, Amsterdam and New York.⁷

An inter-continental highway now exists linking non-objective spaces across the globe. This partly explains the anomalous fact that a group of Australian artists are exhibiting in New York. The production and serious art practice of what could be loosely categorized as 'expanded minimalism and conceptualism' is not bound by national borders. It is a universal paradigm that crosses all cultures, infused with colour and form from various locale and put back into the international mix. The fact that everyone has their own gallery and website these days assists in the presentation and distribution of content and ideas.

The factionalism that exists and breeds with the growth of specialized spaces is as superficial as the aesthetic differences between the various groups work. This mentality, while in large due to the convergence of individual ego's present within the respective artist clans, is incubated and fostered by some (not all) of the art schools that breed an individualistic and myopic outlook with the new focus and development on specialized research clusters. While pluralism has become embraced and sanctioned, it cops a back-hander from some who still seek to split and divide. It has become acceptable in some quarters to say 'it's ok if they want to make that sort of art, as long as they play with only their friends and don't hassle us' or that 'the world would be a better place if only everyone made the same kind of art'?

The inability of artists, artist-run spaces and arts-workers who (either singularly or together) have the knowledge and understanding to create constructive alternate models and modes of practice and which do create these spaces primarily within the confines of their own internal structures, to force a critical creative responsive conversation within the dominant mainstream culture is a

disappointing reality of the current situation of contemporary art in Australia. This is not an easy thing to do by any stretch of the imagination.

The myopia and self-preservation of art organizations that are fearful and paranoid for not having total and over-riding control all of the time, doesn't help the cause. The new wall that was created soon after the old wall was knocked down, although only being psychological, is still a barrier that even the most educated, intelligent arts practitioner cannot seem to deconstruct and break down. How did it get like this in the first place? Just like the credit card debt that you never seem to be able to get rid of no matter how much financial planning you do, some things seem to be implanted and ingrained in the system.

Working within and across these systems, while at the same time not being blinded by the mainstream consciousness of the mass-middle class, the challenge in re-invigorating creative culture in Australia is about to begin.

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¹ Title of John Howard's 2008 Irving Kristol Lecture, presented to the American Enterprise Institute on 5th March 2008

² John Howard, Fisher Family lecture, John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum, Harvard Kennedy School, March 10 2008

³ 'on the back foot' is an English Idiom, of which the origin is not precisely known. It relates to being forced into a defensive position, and I have used it here with direct reference to the game of cricket, whereby the defensive batsmen is literally on the back foot when under siege from a fast bowler. It seemed appropriate to use the cricket theme.

⁴ Australian working class cultural Idiom, championed by John Howard.

⁵ Test cricket: 52 matches, 6,996 runs at an average of 99.94, highest score 334. First Class Cricket: 234 matches, 28,067 runs at an average of 85.14, highest score 452 not out, 117 centuries,

⁶ Title of musical extravaganza held at the Palais Theatre, Melbourne on Sunday 17th February featuring 14 artists' musical groups.

⁷ Sydney (S.N.O.), Amsterdam (PS) and New York (Minus Space). Brussels (H29), Bonn (Raum 2810) and Basel (Hebel_121) could be added here, offering a round World trip of non-objective artist-run spaces.