

On Modern Art.

By Tronn Overend.

'makes visible'	2
The Bauhaus	7
'all our relations'	13
Melbourne Now	20
Canon or hard rubbish.	33

Paul Klee's Bauhaus studio resembled a magician's workshop. Plato would not have been surprised; art was deception, the artist a conjurer. Klee believed in many worlds, or levels of reality. Jeffrey Howe calls these the 'unseen world of ghosts, somnambulists and witches.' (in **Paul Klee. Philosophical Vision: from Nature to Art**, edited by John Sallis. McMullen Museum of Art. Boston College. The University of Chicago Press. 2012:184). His art was an attempt, in Klee's words, to make visible these worlds. It remained just as enigmatic as his writing. Because he was attempting to uncover, through his art, the essence of reality, it could be said he was a Platonist. And, because his art was certainly not a reflection, or mirror, of reality, Plato could not accuse him of being at 'third removed from truth and reality'. Here was a creative artist; an artist making things on par with the carpenter.

'makes visible'.

Paul Klee begins his famous lecture of 1924 '**On Modern Art**' with a metaphor. It is, in part, an

explication of his most well known aphorism – from his essay *'Creative credo'* (1918) – “*Art does not represent the visible, but makes visible*”. The artist observes. Like a tree, he is the trunk. The orientation must be right for the ‘flux of appearances and experiences’. (all quotes from Paul Klee. **'On Modern Art'**, reprinted in Sallis.2012:9-14). These come from the roots. They convey the nutrient. They pass through him, the trunk, and form the crown. This foliage is his work of art. But the shape of the crown does not mirror ‘the visible’. Most cries of incompetence presuppose such symmetry. What the complaint fails to understand is that the artist is not trying to ‘reproduce the visible’, but ‘make visible’ that which comes to him from the roots. From these depths, hidden from the visible, the artist has the ‘truly modest position’ to mediate, to ‘gather and conduct’ these to the ‘beauty of the crown’. His role is not the immodest prophet – what has become a leitmotiv of Twentieth and Twenty First Century art – but the ‘modest mediator’.

This mediation must select from three 'elementary' or 'formal elements': line, tone and colour. The drawing of a line is always measurable – longer, shorter, of a certain sort of angle, and so forth. Tones can be expressed as questions of weight, the brightness value; in short, chiaroscuro. The chromatic value is the quality of colour. The colour wheel explores these gradients from primary (red, yellow and blue) to complimentary colours (green, violet and orange). Klee states these three formal elements are the 'means of pictorial formation'. The character of a work of art, what Klee calls its 'particular posture', 'results from the way one has set the chosen group of elements into motion.' The way lines, tones and colours are combined determines the expression of a work. In Klee's words

Certain relations of measure in line, the juxtaposition of certain tones on a scale of chiaroscuro, and certain chromatic harmonies bring with them quite specific and very particular kinds of expression. (Klee.2012:12)

Each configuration, each combination, will have its particular constructive expression, every figure its face, its physiognomy. (Klee.2012:13)

For Klee, the formal elements describe the surface structure of what the artist does. This is the crown of the tree. But beneath this and the trunk is a deep structure, the invisible roots. Klee's exposition is not clear at this point. There is a discussion of the conflict between romanticism and classicism. The modernist project, 'our own pounding heart', 'drives us downwards, down deep to the primal ground'. These roots appear to include dreams, phantasy, and the unconscious, 'dimensions more distant from our conscious involvement with things.' The incorporation of this material into the crown is the reason why, very often,

Someone in the back of the room mutters the following catastrophic words: "But that doesn't look like Uncle Fred at all!" (Klee.2012:12)

The mediation of these 'roots' into the 'crown', inevitably leads a modernist work to appear ambiguous, perhaps perplexing, or unconvincing. Klee was certainly aware of the apparent 'infantilism of my sketches'. His rejoinder was, I am not trying to render a human 'as he is', 'but rather in a way he might be' using the formal elements of line alone. By

1924, Klee had not, to his satisfaction at least, combined the elements of tone and colour to his exploration of line. To combine the three formal elements in a work 'remained a dream'. 'If someday the time is ripe for such a work, so much the better.' (Klee. 2012:14) Even so, such a work would involve the 'deformation of appearances'. This implication is elucidated in the following way.

The artist does not strive for 'natural appearance', as 'the numerous and loudly critical realist' might demand. To do so would fail to capture 'the essence of the creative process of nature'. This 'formative force', this essence, is 'Creation as Genesis'. Just as creation is at the beginning of nature, in the artist's hands it remains to the end. What these concepts of 'force', 'essence' 'creation' and the artistic 'freedom' to explore turn out to be, remains, in his writing at least, opaque. This is probably not surprising given his injunction at the beginning of his lecture: "Artist, make art, don't talk". At any rate his conclusion - the rabbit he pulls out of the hat - is simply a reformulation of

his 1918 credo. Modern art does 'not simply mirror what has been seen...but rather make(s) visible those things that were seen in secret.' (Klee. 2012:14)

The Bauhaus.

The Great War, revolution and economic chaos heralded the Second Reich. In this conflagration, Walter Gropius, an architect, established The Bauhaus (from the German 'construction/house') in Weimar. It was to survive the life of the Weimar Republic, and was closed in 1933 by the National Socialists. Klee joined the artistic community as a teacher of colour theory in 1920, and his 1924 lecture '**On Modern Art**', reinforced Gropius' vision for the school. A grand synthesis between art and craft, between aesthetics and the technical skills of handcraft, was not unlike the Marxian notion of a synthesis between theory and praxis. In his collective, stratification was not between student and teacher, but between master craftsman, journeyman and apprentice. Neither Gropius nor Klee believed a synthesis between art and craft had been achieved. Practical workshops in textiles,

wood, and metals, in printing, bookmaking and painting set out to realise this. Working hand in hand with commerce, industrial designs - prototypes for mass production - were produced. The artist became a maker of things. Textiles reflected Bauhaus painting. Functional furniture took on a machine aesthetic, like Marcel Breuer's Wassily (Club) Chair. It was named after the longest serving master, Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian pioneer of abstract painting. Architectural design by Gropius and Mies van de Rohe suggested new modes of housing. 'The dwelling for minimal existence' held in the Weissenhof Housing Estate Exhibition, Stuttgart 1927, and the Frankfurt Exhibition of 1929, was revolutionary and adopted by Wells Coates, some years later in London. Moholy-Nagy combined a multitude of media: photography, film, painting, and graphic design. He was part of movement called Constructivism, where the artist was typified as an engineer and a builder.

Because of this heady mix of masters - a veritable multinational gathering of personalities and styles -

it is easier to answer *where* the Bauhaus was – in Weimar, Dessau then Berlin – than what it *is*. The abstract paintings of Kandinsky, or the obscure hieroglyphics of Klee, are very different to Moholy-Nagy's machine aesthetics. Here the artist might not even have a hand in his creation, with paintings produced in a factory by instructions over a telephone. It is in this sense that there was no recognisable Bauhaus style, even though there was a cohering underlying ethic.

The 'Bauhaus Manifesto', delivered by Gropius in 1919, called for a 'unity' in the arts. What he described elsewhere as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a 'total work of art'. Architecture was the cohering element.

He begins:

The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building! To embellish buildings was once the noblest function of the fine arts. (Walter Gropius. 'Bauhaus Manifesto and Program' in Ulrich Conrads. **Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture.** M.I.T. Press. 1971 P.49-55)

'Salon art' is alienated from these origins. Because art is a "...rare movement... of inspiration,

transcending the consciousness of...will...", it cannot be taught. However, if the student is trained in a craft "...the grace of heaven may cause his work to blossom into art." This is a Tolstoyian vision. "The artist is an exalted craftsman". The social imperative is put this way.

Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.(Gropius. 1971:49)

Today - jumping continents and millennia - it is clear that modern art shares many of the visions of Klee and his Bauhaus milieu. This can be illustrated in Australia by two important exhibitions, *The 18th Sydney Biennale* and *Melbourne Now*. Although it might not be obvious whether line, colour and tone have been combined to Klee's satisfaction, the project to make visible is the same.

To begin, Klee heralds the end of the representational. Gombrich would describe this not as the end of illusion as such, rather the illusion has become more abstract. Mixed media - the incorporation of sculpture and film - means artists are now makers of abstract things, not, as Gombrich had thought, just dreams. With these contraptions, with this unity of crafts, the artist does not represent the visible, rather makes visible some idea. These might be personal, political; it is sometime described as Conceptual Art. The artist elevates himself to the role of philosopher or the social critic. Here it is doubtful that the artist is Klee's modest mediator. It is generally something more prophetic. Either way, this intent is explored in 'artist statements'. In exhibitions and catalogues, these are supplemented by interpretations by curators, and sometime by guest 'cultural theorist.' It is interesting, however, to observe that little discussion is ever made of Klee's formal elements, the craft involved in the presentation of the foliage. Much interesting discussion will be on

the history and the social context, but little on Klee's elementary colour theory. The great bulk of these discussion are always reserved for an uncovering of the roots.

Although theatre was not a separate craft workshop at the Bauhaus, the theatre group was an instrument for the coming together of the various crafts. This is not surprising, for as Gombrich has pointed out, drama, and the requirements of stage sets, was an important impetus for the Greek revolution in art. At the Bauhaus, it was also part of the synthesis, an important part of the 'total work of art'. It was a precursor of 'performance art' today. In his Manifesto, Gropius intertwines this art with a prescriptive ethic. It was a new faith, a new equalitarian social order. This political agenda – the solution of societal ills – is one of the most common themes of modern art today.

'all our relations'.

The Biennale of Sydney is, by any measure, the premier contemporary art exhibition in Australia. The incomparable setting of Cockatoo Island is one of the Seven Wonders of the Art World. The cognoscente might also demonstrate that the works of art are worthy of this setting. If they were to ever embark on this exercise, reaching for the exhibition catalogue (**all our relations**. 18th Biennale of Sydney. 2012) would be a poor choice. The connoisseurship of the Biennale may be impeccable. The explication would find John Passmore nodding in his grave. The 'dreary and pretentious nonsense of aesthetics'!

Artistic directors, Catherine de Zegher from Belgium and Gerald McMaster from Canada, see art of the Twentieth Century as a reflection of alienation - the loss of community, the depersonalization of the industrial revolution, and so forth. The art of the Twenty First Century can overcome this separation. Their vision: art as psychotherapy and art as social betterment. The path taken posits the following

assertions. Humans depend on relationships. In Western Culture, sociality has declined, we are 'fragmented and 'isolated'. Art can provide a space to develop 'new models of working together'. From this meloirist position there are a further five steps. The Biennale's theme, '**all our relations**', involves:

1. 'Generative thinking'. 'Collaboration, conversation and compassion, in the face of coercion and destruction'.
2. Reliance, again in their words, on 'the vascular and cellular structure and sinew of a kind of living, breathing organism, from which the Biennale's meanings have grown.'
3. Overcoming the isolation of artists. Interconnection and interdependence is nurtured. From this community is built.
4. Uncovering the 'roots in storytelling as it is currently being re-imagined, as a coming-into-being in relation.' 'In the reciprocity that is storytelling both teller and listener inhabit the space of the story.'
5. Forging a synthesis of the arts. An 'ideal work of art'. As the Bauhaus would have it, 'a new *Gesamtkunstwerk*.' (**Biennale**. 2012:49)

If your eyes are beginning to roll, take a deep breath! The directors provide clarification. This takes the form of '**A Conversation**'. Michael Hardt, Craigie Horsfield, Erin Manning , Brian Massumi and Andrew Murphie are mainly, what are termed 'cultural

theorists'. As North Americans, I know it is unlikely they would have been members of Nimbin in the 1970's. This is uncanny, because the transcript – 'the conversation' – might very well have been an anthropologist recording, late one night, from that commune.

Evidently, Craigie Horsfield has spent "...a lifetime on 'relation', trying to figure it out." (2012:53)

Brian Massumi replies

I was wondering the extent to which our thirst for relation has to do with an experience of the 'impossible'...something that isn't reduced to the 'I' as it is lived according to dominant logics. That would mean that there are elements that don't cohere, that are not 'compossible', so that something has to happen to make them compossible, to make it so they go together. There is an activity of coming into relation that has to be tended to, and that activity is the relation – relation is a coming together, not a being together already. (Biennale.2012:54)

Sometime later, very late in the night I would imagine, this is Erin Manning talking:

In the art environment, there's the example of participatory work, which I've thought about a lot, that puts much emphasis on interactivity but does not develop the notion of multiplicity and thirdness as we've been describing it. This may be due to the fact that relation unmoors experience by recasting the field – it reorients and, in doing so, disorients. Relation activates that uneasy-making phase of the trembling of the pre-individual in its co-composition with individuation. It's a risk, it's uncomfortable, and it's unsustainable. (Biennale.2012:56)

Brian Massumi, then makes the obvious reply: "I was just thinking about this..."! We need not go on. This is a long, tortuous, 'conversation' that begs translation. Here is a précis.

1. The five cultural theorists observe a 'thirst for relationality'. I think this boils down to the quest for community. This is, quite rightly, not to be confused with 'over connection through things like Facebook'.
2. In the social world, the study of relations extends beyond, and is more than simply the study of the subject, or the individual.
3. Some things do not have relations. Their 'elements... don't cohere yet.' This experience is called 'impossible'. They have the *possibility* of coming into relation but are, at present, *incompatible*.

4. The paradigm case of compatibility is a loving relation. Before this relation arises, 'the elements composing me and the elements composing you' are 'incommensurable'. When this separation 'plays out' a new 'co-composition' is said to occur. It is a 'composition' because the fragments have come together. In a word, they have become complete. It is 'co', because it arises between two.

5. Sometime these relations become 'tangled'. Art cannot avoid a 'whole series of tangled struggles', with 'acknowledgements' and 'imagined publics'. Sometime the artist will resolve this, 'untangle' it, because 'intensity of relations' – conflicting demands – become 'unsustainable'.

6. The idea behind '**all our relations**' for the Sydney Biennale is this. It must not be simply a collection of separate works. It is collaboration between artists. The five cultural theorists call this a 'co-composition'. Erin Manning awkwardly explains this as "...crafting the thirdness of a collective individuation that activates a relational field." (Biennale. 2012:56)

7. It is more than an art fair. The theme, '**all our relations**', is a call for 'transversality'. This, one of many neologisms, appears to suggest it is *versatile* and can *transform*. It is more than a mere 'commercial enterprise', where art is no more than a 'commodity' or 'property'. The pairing of artists exploring together, involving a paying audience, mitigates the infecting relations of 'possession' and 'commodification'.

8. As with love, art should be non-possessive. Although artist teach and pay mortgages, non – capitalist relations are to be encouraged.

9. It is helpful if these relations evolve over time as 'rhythmic rituals'. Such rituals are 'place holders' that enable the events to be repeated. The Biennale is a 'place holder'. They like to think of it as a 'relational field'.

10. It should be 'generous', 'ecologically engaged', predicated on 'care and concern', a loving event. This 'functions politically' and is the basis for *community*. This is the *future* 'we hope for.' You've guessed, the cultural theorists call this a 'futurity'.

Putting to one-side neologisms and obscuration, is this 'conversation' any more than the banal? Is it instructive? Is it any more informative than listening, as they might, to the Beatles sing '*All You Need is Love*'? Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster - the Artistic Directors and Editors of '**all our relations**' - must have thought it profound. And they are not alone. It is not at all uncommon to see the relations of the social world presented, in a highly complex and obscure way, as the defining characteristic of art.

A further bizarre example of this obscurantist thinking is an answer given by Max Delany - Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, National Gallery of Victoria - to the questions, 'Why is art important?' 'What can it tell us about the world we live in?'

Art is as much an ethical as an aesthetic pursuit. It is important for the ways in which it involves and encourages freedom and imagination, utopian and critical thinking, pleasure and the realm of the senses, poetic and technical dexterity, memory and empathy, humility and vulnerability,

intuition and irrationality, as well as hard-headed rigour, truth and commitment.

Art allows us to think and see the world differently; to move beyond what is (often mis)understood as 'common sense'; it encourages us to embrace change, ambiguity and difference and to consort with strangers; it opens up gaps in the established order of things; and can, at the best of times, introduce events which lead to new ways of being or behaving. Ideally, art not only reflects a particular society or perspective, but also transforms society in turn, creating new worlds and worldviews, inspiring new communities and belonging.

(**Gallery**.NGV.March/April 2013:37)

Although this statement does not have quite the élan of Walter Gropius, I suppose it is a Manifesto. It certainly is in tune with the 18th Biennale, and the Nimbin Theorists. It includes close to every abstract relation in the sociologist's kit bag. It is bewildering. Art is the elixir for every conceivable form of emancipation, enlightenment and social revolution. Little space, however, is left for an investigation of art as *aesthetics*. Nothing is said about the 'beauty of the crown'. No room is found in this manifesto for a description of the formal

elements of the work, the 'foliage', and the craft that might be necessary for the uncovering of these 'roots'. This is a manifesto for the artist as social critic. And if the artist is not looked up to as sage or prophet, then the work is seen as a reflection of some social malaise, or, less likely, a manifestation of something happier. Although it would depend on the 'tree's' orientation, the artist today is an immodest divine, not Paul Klee's 'modest mediator'.

Melbourne Now.

With the advent of a new Director, Tony Elwood, 'Melbourne Now' is the National Gallery of Victoria's take on modern art; not an international biennale, but a local celebration. Very few of the works simply represent the visible. Rather, they attempt to make visible a whole range of hidden agendas. The catalogue, **Melbourne Now**, is awash with cultural theory and attempts to explain these meanings. The immodest divine abounds.

According to Max Delany, art in the Twentieth Century operates in a 'post medium condition'. This calls to mind the "...bewildering array of media, actions, events and conceptual manoeuvres...". (Max Delany. 'Metro-cosmo-polis: Melbourne Now' in **Melbourne Now** NGV. Limited Edition. 2013. P.3) So, it is not just an artist, an easel and a box of paints. The same might have been said in Weimar. Delany walks hand in hand with the Sydney Biennale when he goes on to say

It is also characterised by a growing interest in the construction of social relations; in how we might conceive new ways to live and work together; how artists and designers might shape society...encouraging new ways of doing things and new social realities. (Delany.2013:3)

Melbourne is part of a global movement in art, and he has helped to bring together what he would describe as 'local knowledge and uncommon sense'. Max Delany then further repeats his position, as reported in the magazine **Gallery**, some months earlier: Art as emancipation, utopian, critical, in 'the realm of the senses', and much else. Here is his turgid conclusion.

...*Melbourne Now* retains a sense of semantic density, sensory intensity and conceptual complexity, harnessing the vision and energy that lie within our midst. (Delany. 2013:11)

The cultural theory underpinning *Melbourne Now* is also local. Professor Nikos Papastergiadis is from the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne. On the local-global distinction he asks what is Melbourne's place in the world. Is it unique or does it connect to broader social movements? The question is posed in a little more difficult a fashion.

...does the teeming multitude of art forms in Melbourne suggest that the local scene is an isomorph of global chaos, or a unique fragment that coexists with other entities? (Nikos Papastergiadis. 'As Melbourne in the world' in **Melbourne Now**. 2013:23)

The answer, he states, is 'paradoxical'.

Backtracking, this is because "The meaning of place has become one of the central issues in the understanding of contemporary art." (Papastergiadis. 2013:23) A 'sense of place' I suppose,

architecturally speaking, involves 'space'. Following his colleague, Professor Leon van Schaik, he then contends "...we all use our 'spacial intelligence' to build an imaginary world." (Papastergiadis. 2013:23) From these manoeuvres is drawn the perfectly obvious conclusion: "You can see the world in Melbourne, and from here you can see many other worlds."

(Papastergiadis. 2013:23) But things cannot be simply left here. There is also the paradox. The part that is Melbourne is 'our sense of place'. This place has the 'trace marks of colonial trauma', 'violent dispossession', such that, paradoxically, our belonging to Melbourne means we are 'forever seeking to be elsewhere' yet also wanting to return to our 'repressed past'.

This is a curious conclusion. It means, for example, migrants last century – Chinese, Italians, Greeks, Vietnamese – who have no connection whatsoever to the past, must adopt this 'repressed past' if they are to have a 'sense of place'. The more obvious proposition is that they will, over time, construct their own 'sense of place', something that is distinctive and

something that might have nothing to do with this past. And if they also become artists one would expect their themes to be very different. It is not at all clear, for example, how the work of even a Melbournian, John Gollings, could fit into Papastergiadis' cultural theory.

The St Kilda Junction is well known. John Gollings' time lapse photograph, *Approaching Melbourne's CBD from St Kilda. 2012*, captures an orange and grey sky in early evening. Albert Park, and the lake, stands out in the left foreground with sports lights burning. The Botanical Gardens are muted and further a field. St Kilda Junction is also a blaze of orange, and the converging Queens, St Kilda, Punt and Brighton Roads plus Fitzroy Street intersect in a strong geometric pattern. The surrounding city architecture is sharply contrasted with distinctive windows sometime picked out in bright yellow. It is not apparent how the 'paradox' could add to our understanding of Gollings' photograph. Papastergiadis certainly doesn't, even though it is critical to his description of the Junction's 'sense of place'. Near

St Kilda Junction, Papastergiadis goes on to say, is a 'living scar tree that identifies' the ritual meeting place of 'Indigenous nations' prior to colonial trauma. Today, despite the best efforts of urban planners and engineers, the Junction is a 'notorious battlefield for traffic' because it is 'cursed'. According to Papastergiadis, this is "...too obvious, as it is there to be seen by everyone at peak hour". (Papastergiadis.2013:26) Putting to one side how traffic could be seriously explained by a 'curse', Papastergiadis' characterisation of this traffic is not even 'obvious'. Melbourne certainly understands grid lock. But does this typify the flow of traffic along Dandenong Road under the Junction, Brighton Road to St Kilda Road, and the rest? This is one of the success stories of traffic management, solved over fifty years ago, and still working today!

All this astonishing cultural theory leads

Papastergiadis to a meliorist conception of art.

I believe that the history of the land, the established political order and aesthetic design could be brought into harmony.
(Papastergiadis. 2013:26)

The point of art, the aesthetic purpose, is to enable harmony to arise from the discord and trauma of the past.

Judith Ryan, Senior Curator, Indigenous Art, NGV, draws out very clearly this discord. For her, art is all about political expression and protest. Steven Rhall's photo: *Boundary (Border Country, Footscray) 2012* is an urban environment. The perspective looks down on the abstract shapes of tram tracks and a pedestrian crossing. Evidently these "...echo the markings incised on possum skin coat and artefacts." There is a perceived 'continuity between the contemporary culture of Footscray and the Kulin people. (Judith Ryan. 'Looking both ways in postcolonial Melbourne', in **Melbourne Now**. 2013:67)

Yhonnie Scarce: *Blood on the wattle (Elliston, South Australia 1849) 2013* is a sculpture where 'aesthetics and politics are held in unsettling equipoise'. The internment of "...400 shiny black glass yams in a translucent coloniser's coffin ...emblematised Aboriginal people killed...". (Ryan.2013:67) Brian

Birch, *Koori elders dancing 2012*, is a painting for 'empowering'. "This land is ours and we protect the families born of this land that belong to the Yarra Yarra clan."(Ryan. 2013:67)

Although the political expression is plain, Ryan's cultural theory is opaque. The beginning is easy to understand. "*Melbourne Now* examines the terms of cultural engagement and displacement."(Ryan.2013:66) Her interpretations of works consistently draw out this trauma. But Ryan's explication is that aboriginal culture is 'between cultures'.

These interstitial spaces
between cultures and histories
encourage new landscapes and
contexts for existence, while
simultaneously fostering both
alliance and encounter with a
dominant culture. (Ryan.2013:66)

This is conceived as a 'third space', somewhere between the past and the present and a time "...internally divided between what was and what will come." (Ryan.2013:67) I am not sure whether this is presented as a new ontological theory of space-time. In any case, her thesis that contemporary Indigenous

art is a response to 'trauma of the past', and a way of emancipation for the future, does not require such embellishment.

In 'Art and urban context', Jane Devery, Curator, Contemporary Art, NGV, also presents art as social utility. The social or political purpose can vary, and can usually be found in the 'artist statements'. Ross Coulter's work *10,000 paper planes – aftermath(1) 2011* is a challenge to 'civic conformism'. David Wadelton's *Milk Bars of Melbourne 2010-13* the disappearance "...of the once ubiquitous suburban corner store..." under the tsunami of globalisation'. " (Devery. 2013:91) The advocacy of 'recycling and sustainability' and the critique of various forms of consumption and commodification are added to this political agenda.

One thinker particularly congenial to the cultural theorist is Michel Foucault. In 'Memory and Modernity', Simon Maidment, Curator, Contemporary Art, NGV, highlights the 'local knowledge' of Melbourne. The exploration of archives and histories

is how artist challenge the dominant ideology. Foucault calls this an investigation into the archaeology of knowledge. A brief diversion into Foucault's writing on epistemology will make this clearer.

The central philosophical concern of Foucault is the subject object relation. As self confessed Kantian, he describes his project, not a history of ideas, but 'a critical history of thought' (Michel Foucault.

Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential

Works. 1954-1984. Penguin Books 2000.) Through such analysis he attempts to uncover "...the conditions under which certain relations of subject to object are formed or modified." (Foucault. 2000:459) These sociological conditions are status, power and legitimacy. This is the grist for the Cultural Theorist Mill. Foucault calls them the 'mode of subjectivation' or, if you like, the 'modalities of the subject'.

The problem is to determine what the subject must be...what status he must have, what position he must occupy in reality or in the imagination, in order to become a

legitimate subject of this or
that type of knowledge.
(Foucault. 2000:459)

These 'modalities' determine whether something is seen as a problem to be solved, which 'facts' are selected as pertinent, and how the solving of that problem in this way is seen as 'knowledge'. When the object is construed in this way, Foucault calls this the 'mode of objectivation'.

Subjectivation and objectivation involves 'games of truth'. Epistemological questions are 'games' because it is the rules that are adopted that determine what counts as 'facts'. These 'truth games' have objective rules – each game has its own rules and these are not to be mixed up – but the 'truth' that is accepted is a social construct. Foucault calls this the 'archaeology of knowledge' and in some sense a 'historical a priori' – something he has found to be necessarily true through the study of history. From this investigation he distinguishes three forms of intelligibility.

1. How the object is described by the scientific method adopted by the human sciences of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century.
2. How the object is labelled by significant others as 'madman', 'patient' or 'delinquent'.
3. How the subject, as object, understands himself. In short, his subjective understanding.

The important epistemological conclusion to be drawn from this is that these three types of understanding are three different types of 'truth games', with three different sets of rules, or methods, and that one must maintain 'a systematic scepticism toward all anthropological universals' (Foucault. 2000:461) which might elevate one understanding superior or preferable to another.

The object in Brook Andrews work, *Vox: Beyond Tasmania 2013*, is a case of Foucault's first form of intelligibility. It is a critique of the ethnographic methods of Nineteenth Century colonisers of Tasmania. The glass cabinet, displaying a human skeleton and native artefacts, makes reference to "...the historical and contemporary trade in bodies across the globe." (Maidment. 2013:140) The exhibition of Truganini's body by the Royal Society of Tasmania is the 'truth

game' of scientific method. After ninety eight years, this game was discontinued, called off, and her body cremated according to her wish. The wooden replica of an Edison speaker at the end of the 'cabinet of curiosities' broadcasts this opposition to her treatment.

Foucault's third form of intelligibility – subjective understanding – is, not surprising, explored in many of the works. This is the main truth game, the dominant theme in modern art. In Simon Maidment's estimation

Discourse on the unconscious and subjectivity ushered in one of the most profound and productive periods of philosophic and artistic investigation – one that continues today.
(Maidment:2013:141)

The second form of intelligibility is the most well known aspect of Foucault's investigations. It started with his exploration of madness. I do not think it is too unkind to say that it does not advance the earlier and less pretentious writings of American sociologists, the labelling theories of deviance of

Goffman (**The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life** (1956), **Asylums** (1961) or Becker (**Outsiders** (1963)). The point is the same. Notions of insanity or delinquency are simply labels. They are social constructs emanating from a dominant ideology. According to cultural theorists, art can also be conceived in these terms. What is labelled as art by the NGV is merely a consensus of 'officialdom'. It can be challenged, the archive can be reinterpreted, the collection rearranged. This is what Maidment calls "...the idiosyncratic channelling of existing collections of works". (Maidment. 2013:140) Patrick Pond's, *The Gallery of Air* (2013) and The Telepathy Project, *Dreaming the Collection* (2013) are examples. Idiosyncratic? Certainly, Foucault might say; yet no more preferable, or superior, than previous curatorial decisions.

Canon or hard rubbish.

Unless modern art in Australia has, for some reason, careered off in a tangent, there are a number of generalisations that can be drawn from the *Sydney*

Biennale and *Melbourne Now*. If Plato wandered into the exhibitions he would see more 'carpentry' than 'art'. It would not be practical, he could not judge it in a pragmatic way, and it might take on a strange digital form; but it would still be a thing, or something that was made. There might even be a place for it in *The Republic*. Tolstoy would be nodding approval, at least with the notion of communion being sort at the Biennale. And Paul Klee would not hear too many shrieks: "*But that doesn't look like Uncle Fred at all!*", because much modern art is not representational in a figurative sense. Karl Popper would not much like it, but his friend Ernst Gombrich would point out his theory of progressive problem shifts must consider each tradition on its merits.

Some criticism, however, has come from the most unexpected quarters. Mark Schaller, a founding member of Fitzroy's ROAR Studio, has recently dismissed much of the work as 'hard rubbish day stuff', except you 'wouldn't bother picking it up'! (*Life and Leisure, The Australian Financial Review*.(L6) 7-9 February 2014.) Is it, then, odd that Tony Elwood has gone

along in his ute picking up some of it for the permanent collection? No doubt the Director and his Curators are making these selections based on connoisseurship. They have been on many hard rubbish drives before. Scavenging through the stuff, they know what they are looking for. They are collecting examples of the modern canon. With any hunt of this sort there are three things to keep in mind.

First, do not be seduced by Michel Foucault. If aesthetic judgements are truth games, there can be no such thing as a canon. The justification for pieces chosen from the hard rubbish does not simply rest on the status of curators, the power of the Director, and their authority within the NGV Board and a wider subculture. If this were the case, a change in the sociological context might enable a work to be relabelled, and consigned to the pile of hard rubbish. As curators, they might reply they are simply collecting pieces of social history for a museum. What they could not coherently argue, if they were to adopt Foucault, is that these pieces might be recognised as canons in an art gallery.

Second, be vigilant of cultural theorists and their discourse of the absurd. Reject a relational theory of art. It is not the expression of trauma and political protest, the striving for empowerment, emancipation and community, which makes an object a work of art. These relations are no doubt important sources of inspiration; they might also be affecting. It might even be said that without them the work may never have been produced. What is created, however, must be seen as independent, something more than these relations. If this were not the case, the work would not be aesthetically distinctive, as something distinguishable as art. As Klee might have expressed it, the artist invariably attempts to make visible these themes. Yet its character as art is its posture, the skill with which, if an image, the formal elements of line, tone and colour are combined. This is the beauty of the crown. The curatorial error in both the Sydney Biennale and Melbourne Now is to virtually ignore these formal elements and reduce the aesthetic to the contrivance of cultural theory.

Third, beware the immodest prophet. Many modern artists are not satisfied with Klee's advice of modest mediation when making visible. Often the expressive elements surrounding modern art are politically charged. It is a moot point whether this fervour, manifest in artist statements – themselves a negation of Klee's advice, "*artists, make art, don't talk*" – might be a camouflage for a deficiency in craft. The praxis Gropius invoked in his Manifesto is primarily a call to this craft. It might also have been a means for something else, but in the first instance it is the importance of the total work of art. The praxis invoked today, might be the very reason why a work should be left as hard rubbish.

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