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From the end of the world:

Thoughts about artists and Ratbags here and abroad.

A ramble and a brief history.

Back in 1996 post-modernist artist Jeff Koons' gorgeous 43 feet high flowerpot sculpture *Puppy* adorned the outside of the Museum of Contemporary Art here in Sydney. It was original, vibrant, engaging and innocent - and rated G. Inside, the gallery bookshop was selling a bright pink book of Koons' art and as I flicked through it I was shocked and flushed to see Koons had featured himself as the subject in a series of X-rated photos with his then wife Italian-Hungarian politician cum porn star Cicciolina. This exhibit was called *Made in Heaven*.

In 1990, Cicciolina attempted to practise what others preach by announcing to the world: "*I am available to make love with Saddam Hussein to achieve peace in the Middle East.*"

Koons claimed the exhibition depicted love - because love is made in heaven. I think they're now separated, Jeff and Art and his Cicciolina. Art critic Robert Hughes described Koons as: "*The last gasp of methane to come out of the rotting carcass of postmodernism*".

- Photo of cow and Koon's head

These x rated images aren't even allowed in some states, yet here they were as ART with no plastic covering, to be viewed by minors, perverts and the odd art connoisseur. Fred Nile where were you?

- Show Fred Nile

Cheekily placed against this self-proclaiming pink tome was a somewhat more subdued book entitled *Against art and artists* by Jean Gimpel. As I began to read it, I was struck by an iconoclastic temperament, bitterly criticising artistic self-aggrandisement. It served to make me feel at once both paranoid and inquisitive because

it described my world, the world of the artist and his or her ego. I started to question my fellow artists and their role in society. Gimpel had had a "loss of faith in the importance of Art", and makes a scathing critique on the cult of the Artist personality, with the vigilant eye of an historian. One central claim is that the Artist (he is mainly concerned with visual artists but the application is parallel to the world of music) has lost touch with the Church and therefore morality. He describes how many painters were obliged by the church to tow the line – creating propaganda Art:

- show photo

Caravaggio had to paint his Matthew passion again because the Saint 'made a vulgar display of his feet'.

In 1573 Veronese dissented from the accepted doctrine by introducing all kinds of human and animal figures ...including fools, dwarfs and parrots into his treatment of the Last Supper – all of which the holy office considered incompatible with the gravity of the subject. Veronese's justification for such narrative additions was that '...these people were outside the room where the supper was taking place, and .. If there is space left in a picture I decorate it with invented figures.' He then boldly asserted: -*'we painters claim the licence that poets and madmen claim.'* The inquisitors could not persuade him to amend his work, so he changed the title to *The Feast in the House of Levi*.

- Show photo http://www.askart.com/artist/C/lodovico_carracci.asp?ID=9001345

These were the Carracci, the artists at the very origin of modern devotional art, accepted because they adhered to the Church's conventions but whose work today is scorned by many on grounds of taste. Gimpel informs us, however, that they ... who condemn(s) these images in the name of 'good taste' should rather consider the question of their religious efficacy. The criterion of taste belongs not to his religion but to the religion of Art.

But it is the love for Art that has survived and flourished, not so the doctrines that inspired it. The religious canon has caused more pain than the art; it is the very worship of Art that creates a harmony with which no other "religion" can compete. A greater sense of real reverence is achieved in an art gallery or concert hall, and in a sense the art galleries and concert halls are the new places of worship, because they are free from the dogma associated with organised religion. I would also suggest that religion without aesthetic value is a worse transgression than aesthetic values minus moral doctrine.

Arguably, the Catholic Church has never recovered from this loss of faith in the artist. Skip forward a few hundred years to the Catholic liturgy of Vatican II and we find that it has not inspired grandeur, beauty or magnificence and has stimulated little to compare with the glory of its former times. Consider this from a present day exhibition in St Mary's Sydney.

- Show picture

<http://www.catholicweekly.com.au/article.php?classID=1&subclassID=2&articleID=666&class=News&subclass=National>

Vis-à-vis art, the Western Church is colourless, and apathetic. Is it really true that music has been partly dissolved from service at Sydney's St Andrews? How many beautiful modern churches did you travel past this week? When did the church last commission music of any worth? The strumming and evangelical moaning that emanates from Hillsong Church surely ought to incur God's wrath and not her blessing. "Art for Art's sake and money for God's sake". Mel Gibson's woefully sadistic and rudimentary portrayal of Christ in the *Passion* isn't really the same parable that JS Bach urges me to worship as told in any of his passions.

- Play Bach

For many years artists unquestioningly served the church. And what obliging servants they were, consider the results of the Catholic faith in Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Giotto, and the composers Gabrieli or Vivaldi. Their output continues to hold even the most stubborn

apostates rapt in a spiritual connectedness; and if the Bach family had been the only Lutheran progeny – then praise be enough. On each of his Symphonies Haydn writes "Fine Laus Deo" - in praise of God.

Perhaps surprisingly Mozart, cinematically portrayed as an uncouth, libertine proclaimed, "*That ungodly Dog is dead*" on hearing of the French philosopher Voltaire's death. On the direction of the Church and art's symbiosis to the Church, there was no greater cataclysmic presence than that of Voltaire's. There erupted in the age of Enlightenment, a volcanic awakening of the thinking ego and mind which spawned new fountains of expression that were inspired not within the spires of the church but rather from man's own inner sense of being. "*Liberty of thought is the life of the soul*" and so was born the freethinker and the Romantic psyche. Voltaire helped to free man, for better or for worse, from the shackles of blind religious devotion. Art became Art for man's sake rather than for God's sake. The modern Ratbag was born.

We can seek the genesis of this back with Socrates who relentlessly penetrated the gratuitous self-reliance in the belief of common doctrine; he was sentenced to death for such Ratbaggery and forced to poison himself. The original **Ratbag**, he didn't propose alternative dogmas, he provoked thought by query.

Beethoven was the first great musical **Ratbag** who defied doctrines and social more/s. Early in his life he found his own musical language, he went deaf, smelt like God knows what, and was a spitting, foul-mouth with a defiant and querying genius. The artist's ego was well and truly thriving.

In the 20th Century, we had disintegration, anarchy and self-analysis originating with Freud, musically expressed by American Charles Ives and Schoenberg in Austria, and continuing with Satie, Sartre and John Cage. Complexity and paranoiac introspection was riding a frenzied wave of experimentation. This is the time modern music got a bad name for itself – Nietzsche's Mad dream for a modern music.

Music became very much for the initiated and the creators shunned the patron and the casual listener. But then something surprising started to happen - fires started to break out on the verdant slopes of Europe's musical empires and the folk musicians and errant gypsy rockers started storming the castles. Many in the European classical music tradition despised and continue to despise the success of popular music and the new world order as America's rebellious culture threatened Europe's hierarchy.

So what does this have to do with the ACO?

This was a musical hierarchy that had little resonance in the nihilistic, larrikin world of Frank Arkell's Wollongong where I grew up in the 1970s. Since I was five I dreamed of being a musician, and for many reasons the function and power of European music grabbed my ear. But where I was growing up, just about every type of music except Meatloaf, was an irrelevance.

I've now been in charge of an institution called the Australian Chamber Orchestra for 15 years, half its age. Classical music continues to inhabit a rarefied world and within that world I occupy the even more obscure world of a chamber orchestra. The chances of you meeting a violinist working in a chamber orchestra in Sydney are 10 in 5 million, if you meet the bass player then that's one in 5 million. I'll briefly take you into this world.

The ACO was founded in 1975 by Sydney cellist John Painter who envisaged a group of musicians in charge of their own destinies, rather than being the sheep of a larger organisation. To this day we remain true to this concept. We comprise 17 core players and perform over 100 concerts each year around Australia and the world.

In 1989 when I was appointed Artistic Director and Lead Violin of the ACO I entered the job with a fire in my belly harbouring in broad brush-strokes two ambitions, one I envisaged would be difficult, - to be a radical and challenging Artistic Leader (which I thought was

expected of me), and the other, I considered easier - this involved the ACO treading the boards on the international stage.

I wrongly thought that the ACO would be accepted *without prejudice* in the international arena, and naively considered that by collecting a good group of players and performing well, we would be embraced. Immediately I ran into obstacles. Not only were we perceived as being unacceptably young (average age 23) for an orchestra, but also the main concern for promoters was the name ACO and especially the word Australian. We even had Japanese promoters suggest we drop two letters and bingo we'd come from Mozart land ... the source of the Western European musical tradition - Austrian 8 letters Australian 10 they sound the same what the heck. Indeed I thought that our unique geographic identity would be taken as *exotic* and therefore: enticing. That wasn't the case. A review on our first tour in Vienna was entitled: '*Vom ende der Welt aber gut*' - from the end of the world - but good. We also played in Oxford on that trip and a group of us stopped to ask an old don if he could recommend a good restaurant, "Do I detect an Australian accent, what are you doing here?" "Indeed you do, Sir" we replied. "We're performing in your town tonight as the Australian Chamber Orchestra". "Goodness me" he scoffed "that's a contradiction in terms". "So is a good restaurant in Oxford". Things have changed.

As I said I thought it was expected of me to be radical: Indeed the Australia Council's charter back then demanded innovation above almost anything else. The head of funding in 1989 said we were not innovative, because we were playing music derived from the European tradition and therefore not to anticipate much support. He expected innovative Australian culture. I asked him what that was and he admitted he didn't really know, because it didn't really exist and this is what he was trying to foster.

In any case I considered it important to offer my music from a European tradition a distinctive voice that would find a larrikinism and rawness that sets Australians apart, if for nothing else. Art is an arena where one ought to be compelled to be original and anti-

establishment - even if one is of the establishment. The Australian Arts Scene appeared in '89 to be still populated by **Ratbags** - Patrick White was just alive and continuing to shoot off vicious retorts, Brett Whitely was there and shooting up, theatre director cocky Barry Kosky was beginning his volatile career, bellicose Bob Ellis was strutting his stuff, as was of course Barry Humphries the towering comic icon. Memories of the likes of Eugene Goossens and Percy Grainger were embalmed in aromatic scandal and remained alive and infectious. All of them are Ratbags extraordinaire. There did seem to be a need and space for them in our society then, and I wonder where their successors are today.

The classical music world, especially in Europe is full of cobwebs and I wanted to push and sweep them away, but little did I suspect that many in the classical music establishment love *living in cobwebs*.

So let's look at these three words *Australian Chamber Orchestra*.

Orchestra: the word intimidates a lot of people. An orchestra is commonly perceived to be a large group of white, drab, old fashioned men sitting dressed in tails, slouched over their instruments playing dead white males' music from *old Europe*.

Chamber: chamber pot, or a place where people do commerce; is a room, a cavity. It is a peculiar word denoting things that don't typically arouse people to flock to a concert. It certainly lacks the romance of 'opera' and the grandeur of 'symphony'. Combined with orchestra it's confusing. Even though Australia's main funding body the Australia Council conveniently categorises us as a *chamber music* outfit because the funding rung for chamber music is lower than that of orchestras, we consider ourselves to be an orchestra. We are an orchestra that performs sometimes in a chamber setting and sometimes we play chamber music.

Australian in the world of classical music is a nonentity a non-draw. It's difficult to attract classical musicians here, difficult to sell Oz over there. Why is it that Metallica, Radiohead and the Beatles have

all come to our shores, but even medium sized named soloists and orchestras decline the invitation? Pianist Murray Perahia when invited replied that he wouldn't be available to come to Australia for the year 2000 or any year thereafter! Part of the problem is that many classical musicians are lazy in that respect. They only like to play for the converted and the modern classical musicians don't like to travel out of their comfort zone.

When conductor Claudio Abbado was head of the Berlin Philharmonic he wouldn't consider coming here on the basis it was 'a tourist destination', even though many of his orchestral musicians were dying to visit. Why should he come here, there is no musical tradition, *das Land ohne Musik (the land without music)* as Wagner cruelly described England. He would prefer of course to play for real music lovers than sun lovers. And so the same prejudice existed against us travelling to Europe. Who would be in Australia to appreciate their sophistication, and how on earth could we express this sophisticated art form over there?

And so on the one hand I was perceived overseas as a radical for performing music from the western canon just because I was doing it from Australian soil and then at home considered lacking in the necessary innovative requirements to be taken seriously to promote Oz art, because I was playing music mainly drawn from the Western Canon. Things have changed.

I did listen to concerns about innovation forging a culture though: When innovation is a distant island to the act of performance, art atrophies. But it's also important to understand the traditions from whence we are derived. The ACO thrives on cross-fertilisation of different art forms and working with artists from different fields. A couple of years ago we commissioned a number of Australian composers to respond to the songs of pop **Ratbag** Tim Freedman. We learnt a lot and were excited about what came out of the test-tube but one critic thought we were having a mid-life crisis. We've collaborated with Peter Garrett, Michael Leunig, Neil Finn, and most recently photographer Bill Henson, sound sculptor Paul Healy and singer Paul Capsis. All of whom have

shed a different light on what we do. This keeps us attuned to the creative spirit. Maybe we don't always come up with a Beethoven's 9th but even our strongest critics salute our bravery.

As interpreters, these collaborations keep us in touch with the creators and the innovators. The more outlandish the idea, and the bigger the **Ratbag** the more volatile will be the result.

Let us consider what the Ratbag is?

I thought that there is no better way to understand the **Ratbag** than to speak, which I did at great length with one of the nation's most illustrious and tender Ratbags, Michael Leunig. We decided that a true Ratbag must possess the following characteristics: the Ratbag must have the courage to be daring; they are neither hurried nor harried; they dare to say the unspeakable but always with love; they are judged by rationalists, but they themselves are not; they are not required to be professionals and are beholden to no-one; they should have no moral agenda; they don't have to have all the facts at their fingertips; they express "the unfelt grief of the people", but they are not necessarily relevant; they speak or act in an uncensored, non-linear flow; they have a hyperactive bullshit detector; they are unassailable; like the bard, the King dare not touch the Ratbag; they cannot be entrusted with money for if they are given money they will use it on valueless things such as adventures and story telling; the Ratbag should confound, astonish, query and disrupt rather than confirm and soothe;

The Ratbag is one of the essential bacteria in our culture like acidophilus is to yoghurt. By breathing in Ratbaggery we become less likely to fall to the illness of moral hypocrisy.

And so who are the Ratbags: one could salute: Germaine Greer; Helen Garner; Paul Keating; Wilson Tuckey not, he's more a cranky politician with a wood chip on his shoulder; Len Evans more raconteur than Ratbag; John Pilger; Judah Waten, Frank Hardy, and all the commie bastards are gone, and no conductors. We did have something of a

Ratbag in charge of the opera- but she was booted out. Was this a bit of Ratbag genocide?

With few exceptions such as John Safran you won't find them on TV because they are beholden and the native language of TV is too glib. Morning radio and JJJ breed a kind of vulgar banality that can't pass for true Ratbaggery. And someone who gets paid \$5 million dollars per year to read Holden ads is not a Ratbag.

Our society deserves a balance of the rationalist and the Ratbag. Has there been a cultural cleansing, a kind of genocide of Ratbags - and therefore, a white anting of real innovation? There is too much emphasis on being professional and not enough support for innovation at the coalface.

Innovation is something you can't force. If you paid Michael Leunig ten million dollars a year you wouldn't get better art from him, but starved he sure as hell is going to atrophy and probably look for another country that will accept him.

Money won't originate art like Bill Henson or Patrick white, but it will buy us the means to articulate their message and it sure as hell will make us competitive in getting good conductors here and in turn inspiring young aspirants.

Author and social commentator Iain McCalman so eloquently says: *"Without a culture of scholarship innovation can easily be stillborn"*.

When first asked to present this talk I thought I must eschew the artist begging for more money. I think it can be tiresome, but it is important to understand that it was no accident that the success and rise of Art in the Renaissance was linked to the flourishing bank sector of Florence.

Just recently a report was released on the state of the orchestras in Australia - we were not included, remember we're not deemed to be an

orchestra. It posted fairly predictable points and then close to the end a bomb was dropped and with something akin to cultural terrorism, it was recommended that 3 out of six of this country's major orchestras reduce the number of their players so that they would become more efficient and economically viable.

Shouldn't we be recommending that we create new orchestras rather than dismantling the uncertain tenure of what we have? We need a vision.

Listen, for the final time this beautiful organic, structure – an orchestra can't be rationalised, it is born of irrationality. Its existence is precarious at the best of times and like all cultural constructs they should be celebrated. Why doesn't the Government look at ways to expand rather than destroy these rare and wonderful beasts? When we talk about education, music is regularly held up as an example of how the brain can be enriched. Slowly we absorb the message about the need to preserve and cherish our outer ecology but why does it take an even greater effort to convince ourselves to look after our inner ecology?

How do we vitalise the Australian Arts sector? Hardly by slashing and burning orchestras. Look what conflicting messages we are receiving: On the one hand, we've never been richer and then on the other hand we have to cut orchestras' budgets again! When will we be allowed to get it into order? If you cut now then you'll probably have to cut in 5 years time until we're left with a tiny ever-divisible sector of cultural cake.

Sometimes I feel fortunate that I live in an age and a society where the artist is allowed to feel like a madman, liberated to explore the furthest reaches of the mind. But here in Australia at a time when artists are beginning to achieve a slightly warmer welcome we need to open our arms to the Ratbag.

Maybe we should have put a Ratbag in charge of the report into the orchestras. But then possibly a Ratbag would suggest that the best way to ensure the popularity of classical music is to drive it underground by banning it!

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