

## Our apotheosis

One doesn't paint *about* anything, my dear aunt...

—Tom Wolfe, *The painted word*

Occasionally you come across an artist who can 'do something': paint, draw, sculpt, embroider. Not often, and certainly not at Mona. My boyfriend has a baffling habit of noticing how art-type things are made (even deploying offensive categories such as 'well' or 'badly') and occasionally – although not in my company as I will give him a good telling off about it – asking if the thing we're looking at was *actually made* by the artist him- or herself as opposed to it having been 'fabricated' by assistants or engineers; and if, indeed, it wasn't, he will pull a smug face and 'say nothing'. I find that attitude unhelpful, frankly. Everybody knows that art is more than being able to 'do something'. Indeed: art, I shall argue, is the capacity to have nothing better to do.

Let's pretend for a minute that there's such a thing as evolution and natural selection, and another wondrous, magical process called sexual selection (I should tell you, I didn't actually make them up myself). At the moment we're very interested (we at Mona) in the emerging arguments about how art fits into these broad biological processes. There are lots of ways of looking at it, but before you consider them, you need to accept that we, like other animals, are shaped by the need to survive and procreate in our given environment. You probably already think you accept this, but it's amazing how many exceptions we make for ourselves as a species. Art is a good example. It's hard to see how something so profoundly cultural might have its roots in biology.

### Nature vs. culture

There's a new word in our lexicon: 'versing': to vs. someone at chess or soccer. I say chess and soccer because those are the main things my partner's<sup>1</sup> children 'verse' each other at; apparently they've learned this hideous pseudo-verb at school. Kids these days! Anyhow, nature is no longer versing culture. Indeed, only supreme dorks still talk about them like they're separate things. (And only people from the 90s, say the kids, use words like 'dork'. FML.<sup>2</sup>) *Oh look that little boy is playing with a truck, and his sister, a doll – Well you know, it's a question of nature vs. nurture.* Snore. Nature and culture are mutually activating. Just as astonishing cultural diversity is '*made possible*' by the evolution of the mind,<sup>3</sup> so too does evolution instill in us the very freedom of will that we so jealously shield from a biological explanation of our human nature. Further: to talk of 'human nature' is not to insist on a fixed essence, but rather to consider the inherited 'range of powers or abilities and tendencies' that will emerge, all things being equal, in correspondence to 'those that obtained during the greater period of human evolution'.<sup>4</sup> Things are not often equal in this life though, kid, meaning that our evolved tendencies are locked in intimate embrace with our

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<sup>1</sup> He's graduated from 'boyfriend' to 'partner' now, because saying 'my boyfriend's kids' sounds a little bit welfare-y.

<sup>2</sup> 'Fuck My Life' – Gen-Y speak for 'this sucks'.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Boyd, *On the origin of stories: evolution, cognition, and fiction*, 2009, p. 23

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *What is art for?* p.17 – **check quote**

learned ones. That's why it's so hard to ever truly understand why anyone does anything, ever. As Richard Dawkins reminds us, genes 'exert a statistical influence on human behaviour' that can be 'modified, overridden or reversed' by other influences.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to art-making, the last people you want to ask about the reasons why are the artists themselves. That's like asking your breasts to account for their very perkiness. An artist can of course shed a lot of light on context and conscious drives, which are important and interesting (see the interviews dispersed throughout this catalogue). But we're concerned here about the deeper drives that sit below the surface of our consciousness. We are reaching for an original 'why' that might mingle with the other 'whys' of our personal and cultural reality. A friend who read this draft, a singer, commented that she thought people make art 'because it feels good'. There's no doubt about that. But why does it feel good? From a Darwinian perspective, pleasure is often a pointer to a biological imperative. She also asked what it meant, in terms of sexual selection theory, that she is a female artist – an important question, to which I will return.

Until recently there's been a yawning (boring) chasm between those channels of knowledge – the learned and the innate. My seven years studying and teaching beneath the rubric of 'humanities' unfolded undisturbed by Darwin; the only time his name was mentioned was when we learned about the racist horrors of Social Darwinism (it is important to know how a concept is prone to misuse, but not without understanding its honest tenets). The very concept of 'the human' was deemed hopelessly reductionist (ditto). And 'reductionist', everybody knew, meant stoopid and immatoor. No one wants to be thought of as stoopid and immatoor when it comes to honing the great truths of human existence. And what's more, this human-nature racket muscles up against some low-rent moments in our history: 'survival of the fittest' has been used to justify some pretty bastardly behavior. Take the Nazis for instance, and the Victorians. I'm talking about the subjects of Queen Victoria here – proponent of Empire and mean jokes about the Irish, not the current inhabitants of the Australian state. The original Victorians picked on us Tassies, too (gee what a SURPRISE). In nineteenth-century depictions of the 'Family Tree of Man', Tasmanian Aborigines rank pretty low in terms of the evolutionary 'progress' of the species.<sup>6</sup> That's a good reason to try to wipe them out. We, the non-evil people of the world, are pretty grumpy about some of that stuff, and we understandably shy away from anything akin to 'survival of the fittest'. Not only does the misunderstood nature of evolutionary 'progress' confuse us. Also, there's a noble fear that if we read our bodies as a collection of evolutionary adaptations to mate and survive, we risk erasing community, kindness, generosity, patience, forgiveness, equality; the finer ephemera of our nature. Noble, but misplaced. Many of these sweeter traits are stitched into the fabric of humanity.<sup>7</sup> So, too, is the tendency towards the expression of free will. And who says, anyway, that any such 'tendency' must be necessarily fulfilled? My body wants me to make babies but I, I! I know how to take the Pill. Ha! Nature-culture. Win-win. (I also know how to give in, when appropriate, to the 'tendency' and throw the pill away: I would like to point out, for reasons of profound self-pity, that this

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<sup>5</sup> *The Selfish Gene*, 1989, p. 331

<sup>6</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*, 1995, p. 38

<sup>7</sup> Not because of 'group selection' but because we are a social species and getting along means getting ahead.

essay has been written from beneath the haze of horrendous morning sickness.<sup>8</sup> Why they call it ‘morning sickness’ I don’t know, the bastard sticks around all day).

There’s a new breed of thinker working in the space between the biological and the cultural, nature and nurture, science and the arts. There are quite a few of them in fact, but we are honing in on a handful, and asking them to help us curate our next exhibition at Mona. The brief is: put your money where your mouth is. You say the arts (from the various vantage points of their expertise) are rooted in evolutionary biology? Show us how. But here, now, we are dabbling with the Red Queen: the creepy wench from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the looking-glass* who embodies one of the key concepts of twenty-first century evolutionary biology: that evolution is not a race, but an endless running to stay in the same place. The more we move, the more the world moves, too. I’ll give you an example from Matt Ridley’s 1993 book *The red queen: sex and the evolution of human nature*. Have you ever wondered why humans procreate sexually, rather than, say, just cloning themselves, like several other species? I haven’t. Anyway, now I know that one of the reasons is that sex helps us keep pace with the parasite species that learn, over the course of each generation, the code to ‘unlock’ an individual’s immune system. We need to mix it up, you see: by mingling our genes with another during the process of sexual reproduction, we change the locks. They learn it, and we change it. So it goes.

So in sum: no more bagging biology, it’s boring. Back to it:

### **Art and evolution**

Let us turn, dear, to two strands of thought – irrevocably intertwined – about how art might fit into a biological view of human nature.

#### *Strand one: art is an adaptation*

Art is *for* something. Actually, it *was for* something back in the period when we did most of our important evolving, the Pleistocene: the period between 1.6 million and 10,000 years ago, super important for us because it included ‘the evolution of all that is distinctively human’.<sup>9</sup> Art, this version goes, is an adaptation, which refers to ‘any trait modified by natural selection that enhances fitness, the capacity to survive and produce viable offspring’.<sup>10</sup> So humans developed and retained the will and capacity to make art because it had tangible advantages for survival and procreation (just like the eye, or the habit of using your hand to convey food to your mouth, evolved under pressure of these advantages). That is not, of course, the end of the story; art has gone on to mean much more to us in so many ways (more on that later). But the question of *what* exactly it is/was for – how it enhances our capacity to survive and procreate – we will turn to in our next exhibition (the one where we invite the science types to work with us). Importantly, this view does not tie art-production to genetic determinism: there is no gene for screen-printing or writing sonnets; rather, the question at the heart of this enterprise is ‘How did a behavior so complex, often so

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<sup>8</sup> I guess he’s been promoted again, from ‘partner’ to ‘baby-daddy’.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Miller, *The mating mind: how sexual choice shaped the evolution of human nature*, 2000 p. 179

<sup>10</sup> Boyd p. 34

costly in terms of time and even resources, and of so little apparent benefit in a competitive struggle for existence, ever become established throughout humankind?’<sup>11</sup>

*Strand two: art is a feature of sexual selection*

This second strand answers that question by looking at the way humans select each other for mating purposes (focusing again on that important epoch in human development, the Pleistocene, and its further reaches to our current consciousness). Sexual selection has been an under-emphasised element of modern evolutionary theory. If you think about it: it’s all very well being the fastest, fittest, cleverest dude in the world, but if you don’t mate successfully – from an evolutionary perspective, it’s like you never existed in the first place.<sup>12</sup> Apparently the old notion of ‘league’ is even older than we thought. Art emerged, they say, as an extravagant ornament (along with humour and intelligence) designed to advertise your ‘league’ of fitness to the opposite sex. The human mind, argues Geoffrey Miller, ‘evolved not just as survival machines, but as courtship machines.’<sup>13</sup>

Classic sexual selection theory revolves around the inbuilt sex-distinction between the egg-bearing female and the sperm-toting male. The former has far more to lose by choosing bad genes to buy into: she will spend a great deal more time bearing and feeding the child in comparison to the male, a difference that is exaggerated in mammals. One offspring will have her tied up for years, whereas he can father a child a night, if he is able to attract enough partners. The limiting factor becomes the female’s selection of an appropriate mate to fertilise her solitary egg. Her choosiness creates a selection pressure for ‘a greater male propensity to produce noisy, colorful, costly displays,’ says Miller.<sup>14</sup> He cites as examples sexual selection’s ‘greatest hits’: the peacock’s tail, the Irish elk’s antler, the bowerbird’s nest, the nightingale’s song and ‘the first three Led Zeppelin albums’.<sup>15</sup> Things get trickier – as they are wont to do – when we start talking about people. For centuries, men have dominated human cultural production, we know that to be true: they write more books, sing more songs, and dominate parliaments and boardrooms. Sexual selection theory seems offensive to me in this context: it suggests there is something fixed about female passivity. But being offended by something is not sufficient to dismiss it as untrue. Bald ideological readings of scientific theories are methodologically and politically unsound. Evolution doesn’t care about my feelings for Charlotte Bronte. Nature and culture should compliment each other in our red-queen race to understand our place in the world, but they should not be confused, one for the other. (Can I just say, how can one sister, Charlotte, be such a genius and the other, Emily, such a nutcase and yet both be considered among the greatest writers of the nineteenth century? *Wuthering Heights* is the biggest load of foul-tasting tripe I’ve ever had the self-loathing to inflict upon

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<sup>11</sup> Boyd p. 11

<sup>12</sup> From David: ‘Well no, not according to Dawkins, and others, including me. If a bit of “gayness” is genetic, and it probably is, one reason is that gay people might help perpetuate their siblings’ genes, by helping with their offspring. And they share their genetic make-up with siblings. If that doesn’t convince you, look at eusocial insects. Males are genetically identical, so most give up any possibility of breeding to enhance, and protect, their colony.’

<sup>13</sup> p. 3

<sup>14</sup> p. 83-85

<sup>15</sup> p. 70

myself. *Jane Eyre* is one of the great works of English literature. And that's how I feel about that).

So I won't turn my back on a theory (if arrived at scientifically) because it offends my sensibilities. However. What may be grounds to – not dismiss the theory, but modify it considerably, is the fact that I am writing this essay in the first place: indeed, look around you and you will see women writers, poets, performers, orators; speakers-out in class and parliament and meetings everywhere. Women are not passive receptacles to male sexual spectacle, they are spectacle-makers themselves. Reader, how do we explain this in the context of sexual selection theory? Miller makes a convincing case for *mutual* mate choice as closing the gap (but not entirely) between male and female creative output. 'Male mate choice,' he explains, 'is usually exercised not when deciding whether to copulate once, but when deciding whether to establish a long-term relationship'.<sup>16</sup> Our ancestors, he argues, were likely as choosy as we are, and it is reasonable to assume that most procreation in the Pleistocene took place in the context of long-term relationships (i.e. a few months of dedicated copulation). Concealed human ovulation (i.e. our bums don't turn blue or anything like that) undermines the link between successful mating and one-off acts of bonking. In sum: there is a selection pressure for both male and female displays of creative intelligence. Men may tend to push it further; to risk more and to surrender more energy to it. We can't do much about that. We can (and do, and will and should) do something about the complex cultural reasons women hold back (or are held back) in areas of human social and creative life. The progress we have made in the last fifty years is an almost unmentionably meager blip on the timescale of human culture, let alone that of evolutionary biology. Yet we've done a lot in that time. Who knows what the future holds.

I am going to take my cue from this second strand of thinking about the evolution of human creativity – sexual selection theory – to arrive at

### **The main point of this essay,**

which is to argue that art can advertise fitness in two ways. Some artworks you see sit comfortably at one end of the spectrum, some the other; most solicit both kinds of 'advertisement', sitting somewhere in between. (I'm very tempted to say that THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF ART and be done with it, because nuance gives me the shits sometimes, but your response would surely be: 'Your so dum'<sup>17</sup>).

So. First. There is art that advertises your fitness via your mastery of craft, your 'patient engagement' with materials, as the Tasmanian artist Patrick Hall once said about his work. This is the kind of art you look at and can immediately appreciate as beautiful. Evolutionarily speaking, its value lies in what Miller calls the 'handicap principle': basically, only those of supreme coolness (v. good at hunting and so forth) have time to sit around whittling little bits of wood into beautiful things that have no

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<sup>16</sup> p.96

<sup>17</sup> 'Your so dum' was one of my favourite entries in an online 'best-of' collection of *Herald Sun* readers' comments. Other highlights include: 'Its hippocritical'; 'Nothing makes me more angry than comedians' and 'God sharks are pathetic'.

real survival benefit. Hello, Betsy! says the hominid: Break me off a piece of that! Art is a way of demonstrating waste. The act of making it says (although of course the artist doesn't consciously think this): 'I can afford to handicap myself so extravagantly because I am doing so well in other areas of life'. Beauty, in this context,

equals difficulty and high cost. We find attractive those things that could have been produced only by people with attractive, high-fitness qualities such as health, energy, endurance, hand-eye coordination, fine motor control, intelligence, creativity, access to rare materials, the ability to learn difficult skills, and lots of free time.<sup>18</sup>

The sorts with nothing better to do with their time. And apparently the sorts my boyfriend likes. Miller calls this kind of 'crafty' art 'folk aesthetics', where the focus is on 'the art-object as a display of the creator's craft'.<sup>19</sup> Have a look at the work of Leopold Rabus [on the facing page], he is a bloody dynamite with the paintbrush. Goddam it I love that boy. There's not a lot to say about the painting, right? It's just to be looked at. To be honest, Leo has harboured more than one of my fantasies (not sexual). It's hard not to have 'undiscovered genius' fantasies about a man who lives in a chalet in Neuchatel, Switzerland, in the middle of a loving and gifted family (see the whole Rabus spread here in *The Red Queen*), doesn't speak English (so is possibly saying really profound things every time he opens his mouth), paints like a motherfucker, and is a champion yodeler. Ok, he might not be Picasso, but he's got, like, heaps of free time, and hand-eye co-ordination to burn. And impressive vocal chords.

The interesting thing about the Rabus family is that they are all – Alex (the dad) with his red riding-hood drawings, brother Till with his Surrealist salute, Renate, the mother, and her homage to folk-art, and Leo with his mastery of the technicalities of painting – placing themselves in a tradition. They are carrying on, and in some ways thwarting, the history of their chosen medium or genre. When humans make art or write literature or music they inevitably take into account what has been before, consciously or otherwise, and respond to it in some way: the best artists eek out some further turf for discovery, and dedicate their lives to inhabiting it fully. (I'm pretty sure a clear exception to this rule is outsider art, but I don't know enough about it to comment. I will hand on to David for that, see page X). This is the difference between a Salvador Dali and a Till Rabus. In his book *On the origin of stories* Brian Boyd argues that humans 'need to imitate in order to innovate. Building on what came before underlies all creativity, in biology and culture'.<sup>20</sup> The balance rests between true novelty, and making use of accumulated effort – it is not economical, evolutionarily speaking, to re-invent the genre from scratch each time, but on the other hand, it's innovate or die. (Metaphorically. Sort of).

Further, Boyd points out that we have evolved to be 'pattern extractors': to read signs in our environment to predict what will happen next. For obvious reasons (if X comes near me with teeth bared, then Y will happen to my entrails), there are distinct

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<sup>18</sup> p. 281

<sup>19</sup> p. 284

<sup>20</sup> p.122

survival advantages in pattern recognition – and this bleeds, says Boyd, into our aesthetic preferences. Patterns tend to signal order over chaos. But we find pleasure, specifically, in ‘*open-ended* pattern’; we’ll get bored and switch off if it’s too easy for us to master. (And remember – pleasure is our cue to dig deeper). On the other hand, if information is chaotic ‘it lacks meaningful pattern and we can not understand’ it.<sup>21</sup> One pleasure of art, then, resides in the way it ‘concentrates and plays with the world’s profusion’ of pattern: not just surface-play, but pattern at the level of genre, structure and content, from the mind-bending iteration of broken prose in Faulkner, to Shakespeare’s double-edged English nationalism in *Henry V*, Baz Lurhmann’s merry meddling with cinematic codes (am I the only person on earth who thought *Australia!* was a good film? I think so), Virginia Woolf’s masterful modernist dissection of the notion of linear time, and Truman Capote’s *perfect* rendering of the short story form in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Oh and – Woody Allen, with his relentless (and somehow never boring) dissection of himself as a man and filmmaker. (There are a million music examples but I am a serious music loser and if I try to offer one I will embarrass myself).

Roman Signer is a case in point. In *The Red Queen* we are showing two of his video works – *Punkt* (‘Dot’) and *Schweben in einer Kiste* (‘Hovering in a box’). In *Punkt* his wife, Aleksandra, holds the camera while he sits in the countryside not far from his home in St Gallen, Switzerland, holding a paint-loaded brush a hair’s breadth from an otherwise empty canvas. Behind him, some dynamite explodes. The shock forces his hand to the canvas; the camera zeros in on the small, black smear of paint, the eponymous dot. ‘The beginning of the painting, and the end of the painting,’ he said to me via translator, his daughter Barbara. Signer’s career spans forty years. If you read about him on *e-flux* you will find that his ‘sculptural oeuvre’ uses ‘a poetic visual language’ and ‘recurrent motifs’ of travel to create ‘tragicomic images that deal with fundamental human states of being such as suffering, innocence, injustice, shock or amazement’. All this is true, except that Signer didn’t mean to do it. What he said (in the kitchen with Barbara, while Aleksandra was frying, like, liver or something) was that at some stage, when he was young, he started ‘doing things’, simple experiments and adventures in his environment, for no real (conscious) reason. ‘Back then, he didn’t think about it’, said Barbara.

He just felt somehow the need to do these things. He never said, ‘I’m an artist’. Then people started to say, ‘You’re an artist, that’s art,’ and slowly he began to believe it... For the first ten years he would always say [to Aleksandra], ‘I’m not sure if this is art or not.’ He didn’t like it when people wanted a definition. He just thought it was interesting, whether it was art or not.

I argue that this is a version of ‘folk aesthetics’. Signer is using whatever tools are available to him at that time (his sense of the absurd, his refusal to take the world around him at its word) to complete a deeply held compulsion: to create. He’s also responding, unconsciously (at least to begin with), to his contemporary creative milieu, where ‘action’ or event-based art hovers over traditional, static art forms. He is playing with and breaking the bio-cultural, art-historical patterns he’s inherited.

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<sup>21</sup> Boyd 88-90

Signer's actions recall Ellen Dissanayake's view of art 'not as an entity or quality but instead as a behavioural tendency, a way of doing things.' Dissanayake's pioneering work in the field, drawn from ethology and anthropology and her own broad cultural experience, advocates art as a verb not a noun, as 'something humans do' because, like any other adaptation, 'it helps them to survive.'<sup>22</sup> The crucial part of the 'art verb' – the heritable essence – is a quality Dissanayake calls 'making special'. 'Making special' emerged in proto-human societies, among the early hominids who lived one to four million years ago, and it is this, and not 'art' per se, that has persisted throughout all subsequent human societies: not all acts of 'making special' are art, but art is always an act of 'making special'<sup>23</sup> During the evolution of the species, humans transcended the 'continuous present' of other animals by developing a sense of their place in time – of having a past, present and future. This emerged in tandem with other higher cognitive abilities, such as the capacity to distinguish between the 'natural' or ordinary, and the 'supernatural', that which sits above the everyday, and that frames the story of ourselves. These traits converge in the rich diversity of ritual we see throughout our species' cultural history: the desire to tap into the extraordinary, to bracket-off certain things, imbue them with meaning, 'perhaps for the purpose of influencing the outcome of important events that were perceived as uncertain and troubling.'<sup>24</sup> The important part of ritual and art, the bit that helps us to survive, is its propensity to cohere us as a people, to solidify our values, and cement our sense of certainty about who we are and where we are headed. They often gather around important moments of growth and transition, when we are most vulnerable – birth, death, marriage, hunting and harvesting – in an attempt to explain the unexplainable, 'to control it and make it bearable.'<sup>25</sup> Quite simply, the emotional and psychological reinforcements attendant to 'making special' mean that those who practiced it were more likely to thrive than those who did not.

Art's socially unifying tendency is evident at the most literal level in Francis Alys' *When faith moves mountains*, which centers on the artists' attempt to gather a group of five hundred people in Lima, Peru, for the (purposeless) purpose of shifting a large sand dune sitting at the city's edges ten centimetres to the left of its original position. The shantytown scattered in the shadow of the dune intensifies the social meanings generated by this expression of community achievement. From the participants interviewed for the 'making of' documentary to accompany the work:

'At first I thought it was... just silly... But I got more involved because it's about doing something with a bunch of people, no?'

'We all agreed: "Let's go". Everyone with his own reasons.'

'When we arrived, we were in the middle of this shantytown. When we got to the top and started to go down, I paid more attention to the houses, to the people living there. I felt... not sorry, but it made me think.'

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<sup>22</sup> *Homo aestheticus: where art comes from and why*, 1992, p. 34

<sup>23</sup> p. 92

<sup>24</sup> p. 51

<sup>25</sup> p. 48

‘The day before it seemed huge, when we were testing the shovels. But there were only 10 of us here. But when I arrived and saw the queue of 400 people waiting there, the dune became a lot smaller, really.’

‘It was torture because of the sun, the heat...’

‘Up at the top, we could see for miles around. We felt on top of the world, you know. After having sweated and sand scraping your face and everything, I felt really good.’

‘The truth is that the people who took part felt totally involved. And the fact that it took on such a huge dimension means that it will generate one story after another. And the story will be passed on like an oral tradition... That way a memory will be built up of an event that only lasted a day, but will live on, for who knows how long?’

Like I said: this is a very literal application of Dissanayake’s notion of art as a form of community cohesion. The important point is that the tendency towards a behaviour for art is available to everyone, as opposed to a select few – just like anyone can cash in on the tendency for humans to learn to swim or to want to have sex. But if the evolutionary purpose of art (as a conduit for ‘making special’) is to manufacture a spirit of unity, how do we account for the productively unsettling function of most modern art – that which agitates at the edges of our assumptions, and compels us to consider our beliefs? There is a quote written on the back of the toilet door in the café where I have been writing this paragraph that reads, ‘The purpose of art is to disturb the comfortable, and to comfort the disturbed’. I could easily google it to see who originally said it but it’s more fun to reference the toilet door, it makes me seem more authentic, don’t you think? Approachable? Affable? Fallible? Ahem. The answer lies very clearly, for Dissanayake, in our chronic incapacity to comprehend the timescale of human culture, or to see ourselves as mere dust specks settled on the surface of the ‘grand canyon’ of evolutionary time. In short ‘art’ as we know it is only two hundred years old. It grew out of the European Enlightenment and has blighted our vision of art’s rich social function, improperly fixing it as static artifacts for consumption and display. ‘It may be a surprise to realize how peculiar our modern Western notion of art really is,’ she writes,

how it is dependent on and intertwined with ideas of commerce, commodity, ownership, history, progress, specialization, and individuality – and to recognize the truth that only a few societies have thought of it even remotely as we do.<sup>26</sup>

Dissanayake’s early work was completed at a time of peak postmodernist fervor: reading now, in the midst of ‘posthumanist’ trendiness, I feel respectful of her willingness to espouse ideas about the arts that were, at the time, profoundly uncool. The arts, you see, have been until very recently arrested by identity politics. In the twentieth century, the breakdown of the British Empire and the rising tide of social change in areas like women’s rights and racial equality lead to a fracturing of the concept of ‘the human’. Which was super, because it meant that our notion of what is

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<sup>26</sup> p. 40

properly human – and deserving of full human citizenship – expanded to include people other than heterosexual, Protestant, European men. Feminist and postcolonial ‘readings’ of history and culture (rightly) took priority – but with the result that the human body, fleshed and unified, was torn to shreds, while cultural theorists, and students like me, were left to huddle around the corpse, trying to ‘read’ the bloodied fragments like tea leaves. One of the things lost (and important change always constitutes loss) was a sense for the deep pleasure the arts afford us and, further, the fact that they do so universally, in some form in every known human culture, past and present. ‘*The arts*’ – as opposed to that ‘superordinate abstract category, Art’ – have ‘always been with us.’<sup>27</sup> Looking at it from this vantage point, Roman Signer’s simple acts of engagement with his environment were sectioned off, made special, by the introduction of elements like the camera, an audience, or even a bounded space for performance. The question of whether or not it is ‘art’ is more than irrelevant: it perpetuates deeply Eurocentric, and very recently acquired assumptions about the role of art in human social life.

For me, Signer’s art generates the same feeling of simple pleasure and surprise that I get from looking at Leo Rabus’ paintings (I visited them on the same day. A long, non-English speaking day. The translator we hired to help me communicate with the Rabus family started having a jolly old time – they really are a lot of fun, regardless of my hapless monolingual handicap – and forgot about me and the whole translation thing entirely. When I was done with them I caught an evening train to St Gallen, melancholically resting my forehead against the frosted glass and staring at the autumn landscape, thinking – poor me! – about the fact that I’d just been dumped by baby-daddy. Well, technically he didn’t dump me, because he didn’t really realise we were going out – he had simply opted to not call me before departing for a two-week skiing trip, and I had decided I was definitely never going to hear from him again, and also that I am probably fundamentally unlovable. I am willing to consider the possibility that I was being a little bit intense. Let me tell you something: boys don’t like surprises, as in, *Surprise! You’re in a relationship*).

Um... Signer and Rabus, simple pleasure... oh yes. One of the hallmarks of the art industry is the tendency to over-invest an artwork with superfluous, nebulous meaning. I don’t think the *e-flux* description of Signer’s work I cited earlier is bad or wrong, but I do think it invests too much philosophical agency in the artist, the intention to reveal the deep truths of our human condition. Art *can* do that (the best does it as a matter of course) but it happens in the viewing, not the making. Artists are blessed, at best, with the clarity of purpose and compulsive determination to fulfill it; what we take from that is ours alone. Beauty does not deliver truth about the human condition in general, ‘it delivers truth about the condition of a particular human, the artist,’ says Miller. His rather individualised take on art’s function does not necessarily clash with Dissanayake’s focus on its collective appeal, just as breasts can be functional for both feeding babies and attracting mates: it is merely a matter of emphasis. The two points of view do draw into focus another, related question, of particular interest to those of us who tinker in the arts for a living: should art be burdened with what Dissanayake calls the ‘mission to inspire and elevate’?<sup>28</sup> At Mona, the answer has been ‘no’, but I’m wondering now if we might soon change our

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<sup>27</sup> p. 41

<sup>28</sup> p. 202

tune, at least for a while, and see how it goes. In the meantime, I am inclined towards Miller's view, which is that art is a vehicle for creative display, not transcendental enlightenment. 'It is unfair to expect a medium that evolved to display biological fitness to be well adapted for communicating abstract philosophical truths', he says.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, we are coded otherwise. Akin to our pattern-seeking nature is the tendency to look for a deeper meaning in random phenomena, and to attribute agency where there is none. 'It is safer,' muses Boyd, 'to mistake a twig for a snake than vice versa. And we will interpret something as a story if we can'.<sup>30</sup> Consider Signer's other work, which translates as *Hovering in a box*. My colleague Jane Clark wrote this about it:

Here is the life-and-death drama of a toy helicopter, battering itself against the walls of a box like a trapped insect. Watch out! Don't let your emotions be ensnared by this small mechanical entity: by its dogged determination, its persistence in the face of futility.

Notice your emotional investment in the little mechanical critter, and your difficulty resisting a narrative interpretation of its 'struggle'. (Unless you're a sociopath). As part of our intuitive psychology humans develop what science-types call 'theory of mind', an understanding of the intentions, beliefs and desires of others. For us, the hyper-social species, hypothesising about the inner world of our fellows is key to our competitive/co-operative success; failure to elicit sufficient insight can put us at a serious disadvantage. As such, we are adapted for drawing rich inference from skimpy evidence. And because we fear knowing too little or missing a crucial causal link, 'we crave extra information and deeper explanation'.<sup>31</sup> This itself explains, I think, the endless groping in the semantic gloom for something *real deep* to say about art. It also says something (if this wasn't already clear to you) about the human tendency towards religious belief, but that's another story. It is in this way that art can be seen as the purest incarnation of the human condition: the bodily reality standing fast against the lofty pull of our apotheosis. That's the good bit. That's why we are, and are not, just another animal. And it's also why the little helicopter almost makes me cry (#pregnant. By the way, I have a feeling it's a boy, I can sense him needing 'space' already). Here's what another colleague Olivier Varenne said about the work in a text-message discussion we had while I was en route, I believe, to St Gallen. (Olivier is French so read it with added continental flourish. He is chronically manic but was going through a short-lived meditation phase at the time):

I love that work. The little beast. So human. We move everywhere to fall at the end. Maybe better staying down and meditate. Do you feel like a helicopter? Brrrrr brrrr brrr and -- Paaaf!

Yes, I do feel like a helicopter sometimes. And it's good to know he's not a sociopath.

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<sup>29</sup> p. 282-83

<sup>30</sup> p. 137

<sup>31</sup> Boyd 199

## **Transition:**

Today I came home from the shops with a new fan for our bedroom because it's really bloody hot, and to my boyfriend's shock, it was *not a Dyson* (the Dyson costs about a million dollars). He went all pale and blotchy and had to lie down; once he'd calmed down we decided that, given time, we could work through this unforeseen stumbling block in our hitherto blissful road to domestic harmony. Phew.

His reaction (only a teensy bit exaggerated) goes to the heart of his preference for art that is beautiful – his preference, in other words, for art that responds to our ancient need to read signs of fitness in the maker. This sort of art is beautiful in the same way that sailing boats and racing cars (and Dyson fans) are beautiful: it betrays an innate fitness for environment – the human socio-biological environment, the waves and wind, the racetrack. 'The people who make Super Maxis don't care about whether they look good, but invariably they do,' my boyfriend once said, gazing wistfully at Wild Oats docked at the Hobart waterfront. This sort of beauty does not need explaining to us, he said, because it does not rely on any sort of abstract notion or external set of values. It can move us immeasurably. Indeed, so precious to us is our aesthetic experience that its violation can move us to disgust and anger: 'You call that art? My toddler/pet monkey could have done that!'

I don't agree with a hardline folk aesthetics position. (I'm reminded again of something Patrick Hall said, which is that he doesn't understand it when people rage against art: 'If you don't like it, that's fine, it just means it wasn't made for you'). (True, but raging against art is so much fun). (Can I also make it clear: I'm not suggesting artists are unconsciously 'indicating their fitness' and that's the end of the story. Most art is trying to do all sorts of other things too, conceptually, culturally, personally. I'm just gesturing to origins). Folk aesthetics wields a powerful force, and one I happily succumb to. But why do we have to leave it there? Why can't we also appreciate art that draws from newer reservoirs of human value? Look at that, I've arrived at

## **The part where I talk about the other kind of art,**

abstract, perhaps, or modern or conceptual, that sits at the other end of the 'fitness indicator' scale. Miller calls this 'elite aesthetics' art, because it gives 'elites' a chance to 'display their intelligence, learning ability, and sensitivity to emerging cultural norms'.<sup>32</sup> He argues that the fitness lies in 'the viewer's response as a social display': if you 'get it', you're in the in-crowd, you've passed the test; but if your response includes the words 'toddler' or 'pet monkey' you are definitely O-U-T. Ok, fine, this is certainly true to a certain extent. But I think Miller is falling foul of the hardline folk-aesthetics fallacy, and dismissing art that engages human creativity in alternative ways; enacting, in other words, the form of reverse elitism at the heart of you-call-that-art! outrage. In short: *conceptual art is being discriminated against*, it's shocking and I'm going to start a support group or something.

Before I do that I want to admit that there are some horribly elitist people in the art world, and some of them are saying terrible, terrible things about art, things that

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<sup>32</sup> p. 284

should never be said by anyone, ever. (I should add at this point that two of the most common criticisms of Mona are that it's elitist, and that it's GROSS and DUM. I haven't quite worked that one out yet. I guess it can be both: snobby, and also full of wee jokes, the best of both worlds). Mona staffer and catalogue contributor Luke Hortle, doing some research work on the artists in this exhibition, encountered what he described as an 'extravagantly wanky' description of Tamuna Sirbiladze's work:

Her wall forms and wallpapers, complete with their ubiquitous painted gestures, act as spatial interventions which extend the discourse that is generated by her two dimensional works.

'Extend the discourse' makes me think of the disgusting 'seafood extender' they put in the crabsticks I used to buy from Mykonos (the takeaway shop on Sandy Bay Road, a Tasmanian institution) after a big night out. That must have been before I got elite. Art writing has become a closed-loop system, talking to itself; something akin to what Miller describes as the 'runaway' process in sexual selection.<sup>33</sup> Let me tell you about a wonderful research paper by Alix Rule and David Levine that was sent to me by a friend.<sup>34</sup> It describes and analyses what the authors call International Art English (IAE), a standard English dialect akin to, say, African American English or British Sign Language. Like any language, IAE has a distinct set of 'lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features' and, importantly, a community of users that it both 'sorts and unifies'. That is to say, your competent use of the language marks you as part of the art world, or not. 'The language we use for writing about art is oddly pornographic,' they write. 'We know it when we see it'.

IAE has a distinctive lexicon: *aporia, radically, space, proposition, biopolitical, tension, transversal, autonomy*. An artist's work inevitably interrogates, questions, encodes, transforms, subverts, imbricates, displaces... IAE rebukes English for its lack of nouns: *Visual* becomes *visuality*, *global* becomes *globality*, *potential* becomes *potentiality*, *experience* becomes *experientiability*. *Space* is an especially important word in IAE and can refer to a raft of entities not traditionally thought of as spatial (*the space of humanity*) as well as ones that are in most circumstances obviously spatial (*the space of the gallery*).

We can trace the roots of IAE to the modern advent of 'art for art's sake' in the West. As Dissanayake explains, before the Enlightenment, objects that seem self-evidently 'art' to us now were not considered to be so by their users and makers. They found no reason to place their creative output into a discrete, superordinate category called 'art'. Nor did they see themselves as engaging 'a noteworthy social identity (being an "artist" rather than simply someone who paints)' or striving for 'a special result (a "work of art" rather than an altarpiece or ancestor figure).'<sup>35</sup> The specialisation of art intensified as modernity progressed and viewers increasingly relied on the critic – that modern scourge – to interpret the works before them (or, indeed, to identify them as

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<sup>33</sup> The process whereby certain traits 'evolve in arbitrary directions under their own momentum', much like the way the fashion industry or academia enjoy a closed system of perpetuation that may seem at times absurd and impenetrable from the outside. See Chapter 3, 'The Runaway Brain'.

<sup>34</sup> 'International Art English: on the rise – and the space – of the art-world press release'.

[http://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international\\_art\\_english](http://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international_art_english)

<sup>35</sup> p. 197

artworks worthy of contemplation in the first place). IAE emerged, say Rule and Devine, in response to the new demands of the rapidly expanding art scene in 1960s America. In this context, the language ‘had a job to do: consecrate certain artworks as significant, critical, and, indeed, contemporary.’ Given that IAE developed to describe work that ‘transcended the syntax and terminology used to interpret the art of earlier times’, it is easy to see how modern art has become synonymous with art wank. Whatever the context – artist statement, wall text, exhibition guide or grant proposal – the aim is to sound to the art world ‘like someone worth listening to, by adopting an approximation of its elite language’. The content is often irrelevant (or negligible); what matters is the authority it brings.

Can you see where I’m headed with this? Art speak has become an important part of the fitness-indication process; it demonstrates your social fitness by showing off your mastery of required expertise – not, I might add, an expertise in art itself, but in speaking and writing about it in a particular way. When I first started working for Mona and travelled overseas to London to research artists in our collection I was surprised by how little the administrators of the art world – gallery owners, assistants, even curators – had to say about the art itself. My questions like, ‘What do you think the artist is trying to say here?’ or, ‘Why is art important to you?’ were often received with embarrassment; stupidly, I thought they were embarrassed at having so little insight to offer me. A few months into my research a nice man, an assistant of the Belgian artist Jan Fabre, pulled me aside and told me I was doing myself no favours going around posing blatant questions about what art meant. It was then that I realised these people had been embarrassed *for me*, for so shamelessly locating myself beyond the pale of the art world proper. My experience is consonant with the manner in which IAE habitually avoids finite subject or action: ‘It is hard to find a footing in this “space” where [the artist] “contemplates” and “reveals” an odd “tension,” but where in the end nothing ever seems to *do* anything.’ The result may give rise to ‘a kind of metaphysical seasickness’.

Who cares about the in-crowd and their crappy little essays. No really – art writing makes me want to dig out my eyeballs, which is partly why I avoid doing it myself by writing about my boyfriend instead. Can I just say at this stage: he’s not really my boyfriend he’s my fiancé and, by the time you read this, husband. When we got engaged his eight-year old, a little confused and having already been contaminated by my taste in music, asked me, ‘Is Dad your Beyoncé now?’ I think he was unconsciously channeling the divine Ms Knowles’ Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It).

’Cause if you liked it, then you should have put a ring on it  
If you liked it, then you shoulda put a ring on it  
Don’t be mad once you see that he want it  
’Cause if you liked it, then you shoulda put a ring on it  
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh

I was very proud of him. Anyhow, that’s not the point of this paragraph (phew, I’m nearing the end, and you couldn’t possibly be as sick of me as I am of myself. You’re probably not even reading this. You’re probably reading whatever David wrote instead. Fine then! Oooh look at me, I’ve got a zillion dollar tax bill. Oooh, impressive. Oooh I’ve got long hair and --- hang on the bell, Nellie! Now I’ve cut it! Alert the effing *Mercury*). Um, the point of this paragraph is to say that I think all

sorts of folks like to engage their intellect, learn, and discuss social change; and all sorts of folks can enjoy conceptual art, too, so long as they are willing to forgo, for a moment, their expectation of a profound aesthetic experience. (Yes, of course conceptual art can be aesthetic too but that's not, by definition, its primary mode of transporting pleasure). Sadly, there is a bag-load of crappy, lazy conceptual art, which can ruin it for the rest. I say, ignore the crap, and consider a modern master like Joseph Kosuth.

Here at The Red Queen we are showing Kosuth's *One and three brooms*. I cannot deny it: its value is not readily available to you at a moment's glance. The artist's high cost, high fitness physical skills are seemingly absent. It's a broom, for God's sake, plonked next to a picture of itself, plonked next to a dictionary definition of the word 'broom'. Toddler, monkey, etc. And what's worse: it's not even, like, original, because it's a riff on the artist's flagship work, *One and three chairs* (1965), in which a chair is placed next to... you get the picture.

Kosuth emerged at an exciting time for the New York art scene. That city had recently wrested the old world of its art crown in the wake of World War II, and attendant toppling of empires. Not only had Europe's claim to 'moral and aesthetic superiority' been 'blown apart',<sup>36</sup> so, too, had traditional notions of art. Indeed, early modernity had a profound effect on traditional folk-aesthetic tastes. In the pre-modern era, the capacity of a craftsman to create a perfect form was held in high regard; but with the arrival of the industrial revolution, values of symmetry, uniformity and seamless finish 'no longer indicated skilled artisanship: they now indicated cheap mass production'. Styles and movements such as impressionism, cubism and surrealism ruptured art's seamless relation to reality: in the age of technology, reproduction of the real was no longer an indication of superior skill. Think of abstract expressionism, where the 'brush-stroke became an end in itself, like the hammer-marks on a handmade spoon'.<sup>37</sup>

The work of these other innovators was 'timid and ambiguous', according to one Joseph Kosuth, in comparison to Marcel Duchamp's'.<sup>38</sup> Duchamp was the first (says Kosuth) to point to art's proper function: to ask questions about the nature of art itself, and therefore the nature of reality. Traditional art, by contrast, is nothing more than 'exercises in aesthetics'; it is only art, even, 'by virtue of its resemblance to earlier works of art'. Before Duchamp,

art's 'language' remained the same, but it was saying new things. The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to 'speak another language' and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted Ready-made. With the unassisted Ready-made, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said.

In this context, beauty was irrelevant. The pleasure comes from thinking, not seeing. Specifically, the pleasure of *One and three brooms* lies in its capacity to stimulate your thinking about the nature of broom-ness: is one of the brooms – the object, the

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<sup>36</sup> Justin Clemens, 'Neon statements' *The Monthly* December 2009-January 2010, no. 52.

<sup>37</sup> Miller p. 286-7

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Kosuth, 'Art after philosophy', 1969

photo, the words – more essentially ‘broom’ than the others? It’s not just about, ‘What is art?’ That would be boring. Rather, it’s about the power structures that underpin our process of making meaning. A painting sits on a wall, reverent to the boundaries of its canvas, its sources of authority implicit and concealed. Kosuth ruptures the membrane; reaches out and grabs us, dragging us into the picture with him. It’s only when you’re there that you can ask yourself: what will you take as given in your material reality, and what is plastic to your touch? On page X of this catalogue you will find an interview with the seminal Australian artist Mike Parr. To my delight Mike spoke, unprompted, about his indebtedness to Kosuth, but also about how he failed to capture the ‘blind drift’ of meaning that he, Mike, part of a new generation, sees in operation in the world. That’s the thing. The value of a work like *One and three brooms* emerges in your sensitivity to the legacy it honours and defines: that new, modern chapter – written in a new, modern language – of human creativity.

In terms of our evolved preferences: these modern, anti-aesthetic values have emerged too recently (way, way, way too recently) to have any impact on our deep-seated, genetically coded desires. Culturally, our advances in the past 10,000 years have been profound; biologically, they are largely irrelevant. What this means is that the unfolding of human knowledge, culture, society and technology has undermined our ‘ancient signaling system’, creating tension between ‘evolved aesthetics and learned aesthetics’.<sup>39</sup> We feel that tension everywhere of course – between the learned and the evolved. It is, I would say, one of the hallmarks of humanity. That is the point. We are not selfish-gene machines, or a compilation of just-so stories (How The Artist Got His Brush), but a complex exchange of conflicting desires, values and behaviours, in constant flux with our environment. Art means a great deal more than our evolved preferences for pattern, form and colour; it’s also legacies, histories and learning. So often it is about building on or thwarting what has been before. We can honour all of it – the crafty and the conceptual, and all that sits between – and in doing so, enrich our knowledge of ourselves and of the dazzling ingenuity of our fellow men and women. Is there any other point?

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<sup>39</sup> Miller, p.288