

# The disappearance of art

THE EVATTS, THE ARTS, THE WEBS

Ian Milliss

2018 Annual Evatt Lecture



*This is the text of the eighth Annual Evatt Lecture, presented by Ian Milliss at the **H.V. Evatt Memorial Dinner**, introduced by Susan Templeman MP and hosted by the Evatt Foundation in association with the Katoomba branch of the ALP on 19 May 2018 at the Mountain Heritage Hotel, Katoomba.*

**Ian Milliss** is an artist and writer who has long argued that art is a process of constant cultural adaptation, and that this now occurs in work not usually seen as art, produced by people who do not usually describe themselves as artists. His approach emphasises the need to adapt: to evolve, to recycle the materials we appropriate, and to ensure that our culture, our society — and, indeed, ourselves — remain sustainable. Ian's early conceptualism developed into a practice based on cultural activism, working with community and political groups rather than the art market. The issues he has worked with include green bans, prisons, unionism, artists' rights, sustainable farming, community media and arts programs (including the Australia Council's 'Art and Working Life' program), heritage and conservation and climate change.

Ian Milliss has worked for trade unions, business and government, ranging from painting and installation to publishing and online media. His main recent interests have been land use, the commons, big data and open source processes, and have resulted in The Yeomans Project (with Lucas Ihlein) on agricultural innovation at the Art Gallery of NSW (2013–14); a retrospective at the Macquarie University Gallery (2006) and a joint exhibition with Vernon Treweeke at the same gallery ('Then and Now', 2014); another retrospective, at Artspace Sydney (2013); the formation of the Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation based on his work in the group show *cementa 2013*; other group shows, ranging from Monash University's 'Art As A Verb' to the Redfern Biennale 2014; and a 2017 solo exhibition at Penrith Regional Gallery on the role of quarry workers in the Lewers family's modernist quest. He has written for *Art Monthly Australia*, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* and *RealTime Arts*, and guest edited the March 2017 *Artlink* magazine issue on big data and data visualisation.

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When I was initially approached about this lecture my first reaction was disbelief. It wasn't just my natural false modesty, it was knowledge of a particular fact of life: that on the whole visual artists are no longer seen as significant public intellectuals — exhibitions are rarely reviewed, artists don't appear on *Q&A* or *Insight* or any of those other sites of contemporary relevance, they don't turn up on the honours list. They have almost disappeared and their disappearance is worth discussing, in terms of both what has happened in our society since World War II and how a progressive political movement must understand contemporary culture and develop appropriate policies around it.

So I want to talk about Australian cultural history over the last century, how we got to this point and why it

matters. And it seems logical to start with the Evatts because they epitomised the attitudes of educated progressive people during the era of Keynesianism and the welfare state, an attitude that is still paid lip service to in arts policy long after neoliberalism threw that baby out with the bathwater before selling off the bathtub.

I highly recommend the exhibition of the work of Mary Alice Evatt currently in the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre: it illustrates everything I would like to say about the Evatts and their very active involvement in the art world. As avid and knowledgeable collectors of contemporary art, they were described as 'fanatics about modern art' and they played a

more active role in the Australian art world than probably any politicians before or since, studying, supporting, collecting, promoting exhibitions, even helping to found the most influential artists group in Australian art history, the Contemporary Art Society, in both Victoria and New South Wales.

They saw the arts and social progress as intimately bound together. They had been described in the 1920s as 'William Morris socialists', probably by that time an early version of the 'inner city latte sippers' insult. But what William Morris understood in the late 19th century is something the left in general seems to have forgotten while the

right has come to understand only too well: that in the phrase of right-wing American publisher Andrew Breitbart 'politics is

downstream of culture'. Change the culture, the stories, change people's understanding of the world and you will change politics. That was at the heart of Morris's socialism. Evatt understood that, Whitlam understood that, and heaven forbid, that very small man John Howard understood it too.

But the Evatts' fanaticism about modern art played out in the context of the crisis in Australian culture following World War I. John F. Williams, in his book *The Quarantined Culture: Australian Reactions to Modernism, 1913-1939*, argues that in 1913 the Australian press and Australian society displayed a cosmopolitan openness to the culture of the modern world but by 1919 the grief and the

propaganda of war had led to Australia becoming a quarantined culture, an inward-looking society bent on keeping the outside world out. Williams argues that the creation of the Anzac legend, the back-to-the-land movement, notions of racial superiority and the mythology of the masculine nation were reactionary and anti-modern elements of what I would call cultural depression, the beginning of the notorious cultural cringe that to this day still defines us as a settler colonial society in constant neurotic search of an empire to attach ourselves to.

It was this closed-minded provincialism that the Evatts opposed by their

international modernism. The modernism the Evatts loved may only finally have arrived in Australia in the 1940s, but it arrived with a vengeance. Its cultural impact was closely linked to migration both in the sense that among the migrants were trained and experienced modernist artists, architects and designers, but also in that migration brought diversity and alternative ways of living and understanding life. This was a period when the culture changed, and once the culture changes nothing can hold back the eventual political and legislative change, a fact demonstrated by the recent marriage equality farce.

But the Menzies government, like the current Liberal government, mounted a rearguard action to hold back that change. Geoffrey Dutton comments in his book *The Innovators* that:

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*'I don't think there is much doubt that the ALP policies under Whitlam were close to what the Evatts might have hoped for.'*

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*One of the firmest bases for the enduring conflict between Menzies and Evatt lay in their polarised opinions about modern art ... It was Evatt of course, and not Menzies, who had the future of Australian art on his side ... Would there had been more patrons like the Evatts! Looking back one is very much struck by the humility of their attitude to art. Whereas Menzies was quite confident of the extent of his knowledge, and that he could lay down the law to others in art as he could in court, Bert and Mary were always seeking to educate themselves.*

I can only comment that it seems, from Menzies to Brandis, that the Dunning-

Kruger effect has always been a defining characteristic of Liberal Party arts ministers. Menzies may have defeated Evatt politically but Evatt nonetheless represented the values of the future. These progressive social and cultural values were to form the postwar welfare state consensus in Australia and most western countries. In Australia they only reached their final political fulfilment in the Whitlam era.

Bert Evatt did not live to see that era, dying in 1965. Ironically, his care in his final years was partly financed by the sale — at enormous profit — of the Modigliani painting bought from the 1939 Melbourne *Herald* exhibition of contemporary French and British art. But Mary Evatt lived to 1973, still a student at Canberra School of Art, still obsessed with learning and looking at the world in new and different ways.

I don't think there is much doubt that the ALP policies under Whitlam were close to what the Evatts might have hoped for. Expanded social services, free education and healthcare, legislative recognition of multiculturalism, were paralleled by an explosion of cultural support as a whole range of art and media schools and video access centres were set up, funding expanded for galleries and museums, heritage policies were implemented and the Australia Council and the Australian Film Commission were created as arms-length funding organisations beyond the political bias and pork barrelling that had compromised the limited funding available under Menzies.

This whole era can be characterised as the time it was finally recognised that we *could* have nice things and we *should* have them,

that it was a fundamental government role to promote and fund the making of the fine arts and provide general access to them. Of course those of us around at the time believed this was the beginning of a brave new world, little realising that it was in fact the final flowering of the postwar era and the end of belief in a shared sense of community and social good. By 1979, with the election of Thatcher and then the election of Reagan, neoliberalism had arrived.

But art, and culture in the wider sense, was already running well ahead. With the development of conceptual art in the late 1960s artists began to move away from the

idea that art could be defined by specific media. As far back as 1913 Duchamp's 'Urinal' and other readymades made a clear point: that art is defined by ideas and beliefs and social context, not by media (like painting). It had taken almost 50 years for the implications of his gesture to completely hit home but its consequences were finally overwhelming. At a time when the Vietnam War and the Cold War led young people to believe their elders were no better than the fascists and Nazis of the recent past, there was soon as much critical opposition to the institutions and ideology surrounding art as there was to other institutions of society. Once you looked closely at the social context of official art, the boards

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and benefactors of museums, for instance, it increasingly looked like a front set up to disguise the wealth of war profiteers

and slum landlords, as the artist Hans Haacke, for example, exposed in his rigorously researched investigative conceptual works.

But for the conventional art market the 1980s can be seen as a return to order after the distressing radicalism of the 1965–75 period. The neoliberal takeover of the art world began, as elsewhere, and art was restructured into a neoliberal business model.

Arts policy at first remained unaffected. The recently set up Australia Council indulged both the most radical and the most conservative tendencies. It still seemed fairly simple to fund whatever promoted art production and

expanded access to the arts. This straightforward approach meant that even during the Fraser years, with an Australia Council headed by a former Liberal Party president Timothy Pascoe, support was introduced for community arts, and even the Council's most radical policy ever, the trade union-based Art and Working Life program, which saw Ozco funding arts officers in the ACTU and labour councils and even partially funding the publicity for trade union campaigns provided they involved participation of artists.

But I'm sure you don't need me to spell out

the disastrous consequences of neoliberalism. Like all the worst political ideas throughout history, it was sold as both glamorous and fashionable, necessary and desirable, as inevitably unquestionable and irresistible as a force of nature. The government assets that we had all paid for in the time of the mixed economy were now sold off to the few, who then asset-stripped them and left their debt-ridden shells to limp along selling overpriced and over-marketed substandard services. Government itself was taken over and turned into a mechanism for subsidising business and for managing rent seeking, dividing up virtual monopolies between companies that now resist progress and innovation with every political bribe — or donation, I perhaps should say — that they can muster.

Those areas of government that could not simply be sold off were re-purposed, and that has been the fate of cultural institutions of

every sort. Art schools have been forced into amalgamations with universities, where they have been asset-stripped then quietly — or not so quietly — strangled. Museums and galleries have been effectively handed over to the tourism and entertainment industries. Others, like the Sydney Powerhouse Museum, Sydney College of the Arts and possibly the National Art School, are being destroyed for the sin of occupying real estate coveted by developers. And finally some, like the Art Gallery of New South Wales, were slowly underfunded until

forced into the arms of wealthy so-called benefactors who use them as their private playpens, with the

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art as a form of superior interior decoration. Tourism and perhaps the benefactors' desire for enhanced views is probably at the heart of the proposal to spend \$400 million expanding the Art Gallery of New South Wales while the entire area from, say, Marrickville to here, where most of Sydney's population lives, still receives negligible cultural funding.

But neoliberalism has actually shown a greater understanding of the significance of adaptive and critical culture than the left, and therefore has been determined to control it or destroy it. The art market in Australia mostly went for decorative or novelty forms, while internationally it focused on art as gigantic gambling chips and forms of ostentatious wealth display. The institutions serve the entertainment and tourism industries by featuring a constant turnover of attention-seeking content focused on novelty, shock and awe.

The same business imperatives came to apply as elsewhere, hence early in the '80s styles like appropriation, the first neoliberal art style, meant the old art could simply be copied and sold again as new art, while in following years it became common to sub-contract the production of work to highly skilled but low-paid workers in third world countries. In more recent times the development of so-called social practice has been the equivalent of reality television, allowing art entrepreneurs to simply manage and exploit the work of other communities. But more innovative activities that didn't provide content for the institutions' exhibition model went mostly unfunded and ostracised.

The end result, after several decades, is that art, in its most

important sense of cultural production that creates new understanding of the world, has disappeared, to be replaced by the globalist art product that looks like art but lacks that essential function of art, and has no real cultural significance.

But let's not cry too much over art. If art has disappeared, so too has education, replaced by the very expensive purchase of paper credentials; healthcare is on the way to disappearing for all but the wealthy with private insurance; even roads in the sense of shared transport infrastructure are disappearing despite more and more of them being built, because their supposed transport function is irrelevant — they are in fact the infrastructure for tax farming, for a privatised

tax system owned by large corporations. That's what neoliberalism does: it's a parasite that takes over social institutions and eats them from the inside.

Of course that is only half the story. To get back to the title of my talk, artists have disappeared in one sense because they have been replaced by arts business entrepreneurs supplying content to the institutions, biennales etc — big art, I guess you could call it. But they have also disappeared in a different way, because everyone now can be their own artist, and if everyone is an artist then no one is an artist.

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It turns out that the most radical wing of conceptualism, the artists whose work turned into activism,

many of whom disappeared from the artworld into daily life, were the ones who were really fulfilling art's role of foreseeing the future. Different cultural forms, more energetic and disrespectful, far more in tune with the reality of our times, were developing in network culture. In the heart of the most neoliberal of corporations, the social media that grew up after the turn of the century, neoliberalism had created its own undermining contradiction. It had accidentally fulfilled one of modernism's greatest ambitions, the integration of art into daily life, although I'm sure no one expected that would happen in the form it has, as proliferating social media memes, youtube videos, twitter novels, instagram essays and pinterest galleries, produced by people who didn't think of themselves as artists but had

bigger audiences than any conventional artists. March and April this year.

There is now an enormous distributed, networked and semi-anonymous self-generating culture, and although it has existed for quite some time it remains incomprehensible to policy makers.

An objective observer would say neoliberalism died with the global financial crisis of 2008, but as we know, zombie ideas never die, a fact proven by Labor shadow treasurer Chris Bowen pledging even bigger surpluses and even bigger tax cuts

than Scott Morrison — the mind boggles. Neoliberalism may be completely discredited in the eyes of most of the population, but

clearly not in the eyes of politicians, whether they be right, left or that grotesque mutation, the centrists. Hypnotised and corrupted by lobbyists waving cheque books, politicians' failure to recognise reality is the root cause of the popular contempt for politics as it is now practised, a failure that has brought about not only the presidency of Trump and the resurrection of Pauline Hanson but also the rise of Corbyn and Sanders, all driven by uprisings against politics as usual. The culture has changed, even if the politicians haven't, yet. Just think again of the marriage equality referendum debacle: that same barely contained anger against the cowardice and backwardness of politicians applies elsewhere, and if you don't believe me then you obviously didn't see the Ipsos poll of Australians between the age of 18 and 65 conducted in

That poll found that 88 per cent of Australians agreed that education should be free of charge, 89 per cent said that free health care is 'a human right' and 76 per cent agreed that 'the rich should be taxed more to support the poor'. It showed that almost half, 49 per cent, agreed that 'socialist ideals are of great value for societal progress'. Above all, it found that 80 per cent agree that every citizen should have the right to an 'unconditional basic income'.

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Now if that doesn't show how out of touch both major political parties are I don't know what does, given that in practice both major

parties consistently oppose or undermine those clear public desires. Given that the ALP won't adopt them anytime soon I think there is still plenty of scope for Shorten, who remains more disliked than Turnbull, to turn out to be Australia's own Ed Milliband. Which gets me to my last point. In an era of zombie policies, where would a progressive arts and cultural policy fit?

Cultural policy is enormously important; it's not optional. It reminds me of Rudd's absurd comment that climate change was the greatest moral challenge of our generation. In fact morality has nothing to do with it, it is a simple matter of survival, and so too is cultural diversity, innovation and adaptation. It's not simply an issue of whether we can have nice things in our society; it's how we create an

entire population capable of dealing with the catastrophic problems that face us in the very near future.

What can a cultural policy do? It can keep funding legacy arts, the empty forms that re-enact what significant culture used to be, but is there any real point to that? The official art scene and its 'fine arts' have very little to do with cultural change. Bold and innovative ways to keep doing exactly what has been done for the last fifty years, two centuries even? Really? As I said, it's mostly about gambling, status display, decoration and entertainment, and the best that can be said about it is that it should be preserved as cultural heritage.

Strangely, it now resembles sport more than living culture. Two-thirds of Australia Council

funding goes to 28 major performing arts companies, and things like opera and symphony orchestras, blockbuster exhibitions, biennales and the Archibald are basically cultural heritage, involving endless reiterations of the same thing within a fairly tight set of rules, exactly like sport.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think that they should be defunded. On the contrary, I think their funding should be *massively* increased. The funding for all creative industries could be doubled, tripled even, and still be nowhere near the subsidies received by the mining industry, that employs approximately a third the number of people that creative industries employ. But I think they should be re-

categorised, that fine arts and sport and cultural heritage should all be together in one very well funded department that represents the nice things any decent, civil society should have, not as an add-on but as a primary goal of the society. It could even fund statues of Captain Cook, although I wouldn't recommend it. This re-categorisation would clear the way for us to think more strategically about what is really needed in this historic moment.

This is where discussion of excellence comes into it. When people like Brandis, or Keating for that matter, talk about excellence they speak as consumers of culture, and all consumers are concerned about quality control.

Unfortunately, culturally it is the concern of the philistine. The Liberals' approach to

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*'We must very rapidly begin to understand the world in entirely different and creative ways, and through that perhaps invent a way to a liveable future rather than to extinction.'*

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arts funding can be summarised as the rich should have nice things like the arts and if poor people can be made to pay for that then so much the better. The Liberals now, like Menzies then, mistakenly think they know best, and the world remains full of people whose attitude to contemporary networked culture is like that of JH McDonald, the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, who declared in 1937 that 'I do not know what modern art is, I do not understand it ... but it is bad art.' Sadly, a lot of the time the ALP hasn't been a lot better although it's more prone to a neoliberal instrumentalist approach about the economic importance of creative industries.

The issue is very different for cultural

producers. Innovation is not about excellence, it is about adventure, experiment and risk, needing both time and resources. Almost by definition, forward-looking cultural activity is no longer going to look like art at all, or if it does it will probably look like bad art. I've been arguing for some time that there should be no problem with funding bad art, reckless, incomprehensible, wasteful unresolved activities that will probably go nowhere but may go exactly where we need to go but didn't know the way.

So what is also needed now is a further department, a Department of Cultural Adaptation, a free-ranging ministry that can promote activity in any and every discipline, from agriculture to science, from big data to psychology, from blockchain to ecological conservation and anything else at all as long as it involves seriously rethinking the world.

Basically it would be there to fund a whole range of wildly experimental ideas that just might turn into something. Surely it is not beyond the political imagination to make that acceptable? Surely anything is saleable by the political geniuses who can convince themselves and others that it is perfectly reasonable to spend billions on bombers that can barely fly, or to torture innocent refugees just to discourage the others, or to refuse cash welfare payments to people because they are aboriginal?

But there is an even greater issue here. For a

huge and ever-growing mass of people, most of them younger than the old people in parliament, the culture has changed.

Networked culture as enabled by social media is essentially do it yourself culture, closer to a genuine popular culture than the manipulative corporate culture that is so dishonestly labelled 'popular culture'. And like everything to do with social media, it scares the daylights out of vested interests, the failing corporate media and politicians who simply cannot cope with the fact they can no longer stop people from answering back, try as they might with censorship or furbies about fake news or con men spouting magical analytics.

If the most innovative cultural production is occurring in these activities that are not considered art, by people who don't call themselves artists, and disseminated mostly by social media, and if this type of innovation is increasingly essential to human survival but changes so quickly it can only be codified in retrospect, then what can a government do to provide support?

The answer is shockingly simple. Start supporting everyone! This change in culture is foreshadowing the enormous changes throughout all of society, like it or not. The coming climate cataclysm and mass extinction will be the worst thing to ever happen, at the same time as the mass unemployment that will be created by artificial intelligence and widespread robotics will possibly be the best thing to ever happen, finally freeing humans from soul-destroying forms of work, although

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that too could be a cataclysm, if not handled properly. You don't create an adaptive resilient society that can deal with such rapid extreme change by targeting a small group; you need to bring everyone along. We need to value the ability to think, to imagine, or even to simply know and to understand, even more than we currently value the ability to hit a ball with a stick.

Some of the solution is to claim back what we allowed to be stolen, things like free education, genuine universal healthcare without a parasitic private system attached, public housing for all who need it, not just a small percentage of the most extreme welfare cases.

We will soon be facing an unbelievably huge flood of climate refugees so we will need to learn to value refugees, just as we slowly learned to do post-World War II.

But above all we need time, and the way to create time is to turn unemployment and underemployment and stressful meaningless precarious employment into time for learning and creating, and the way to do that is through universal basic income, something I will

remind you again that 80 per cent of Australians support. And while we are on that subject, there has been a false dichotomy building between universal basic income and job guarantees. The answer to that is simple: there is no conflict, you do both. The claim is that having a job gives meaning to life when the truth is that having a life is what makes even the worst job meaningful. A job guarantee program, which at its worst is work for the dole, at its best is massively expanded government services, and who could possibly be so unreasonable as to object to more services?

But it's best to think of universal basic income as giving everybody an arts grant, every year. That leaves open the possibility of anyone and everyone having the time to engage in the activities that will

allow us to create the radically different culture we will need if we are to face and adapt to the climate change catastrophe our current grotesquely dysfunctional culture has created.

It's Time! as someone once said. And the alternative is extinction.

*'But above all we need time, and the way to create time is to turn unemployment and underemployment and stressful meaningless precarious employment into time for learning and creating.'*

