

Mom and Pop Art

Sing: 'you put the beer in the coconut and drink it all up' (repeat twice) 'and throw the can away' (repeat twice).

I was invited to write something for this catalogue because I presented a class at the Victorian College of the Arts a couple of years back (called *Chris Krauss for Lovers, Rosalind Krauss for Others*) which encouraged students to produce their own manifesto. I didn't think this was the case, but now that I return to look at that material, turns out it was true. Little did I know I had written my own manifesto to the student group:

We will examine recent critical writings which illustrate diverse approaches to writing for and about contemporary art with a focus on methods and techniques of writing representative of recent trends by both leading and also lesser known writers. We will consider a variety of ways – sociopolitical, anecdotal, philosophical, formal, and fictional – in which culture and the creative product can be written about. We will also examine a selection of texts that do not directly address artistic practices, with the view that by evaluating material which at a glance seems irrelevant to these practices, it is possible to construct new critical interpretations outside of the expected and the unexpected.

Sounds intriguing (if not a little bit dry ...)

For me the nature, structure and presentation of the artist manifesto says so much, about things which can be so ambitious and vast, or things in such an isolated and private way that in the end it is the epitome of existentialism. It's a scary word, it may even scare you off, because it means everything and nothing, which is a really very unpleasant place for the brain to be sometimes. But nothing a manifesto or two can't help appease.

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It's 1999 and Homer Simpson is not having a very productive Saturday afternoon. He is lying in a hammock drinking beer out of a coconut shell when Marge, true to her character, reminds Homer that he is a lazy indolent oaf who should be doing more with his time than drinking beer in a hammock. An indignant Homer then heads to the hardware store where he impulse-purchases a DIY barbecue construction kit.

Homer botches the barbecue's construction and is left with a pile of bricks, mortar, concrete, metal pips, metal grills, etc. Homer beats the pile of rubble with a metal bar while crying, 'why must life be so hard, why must I fail at every attempt at masonry!' He excavates then drives the messed up barbecue structure back to the hardware store to request a refund. Of course Homer's request is refused and during the car trip home he loses control of the car and trailer and as a result the out-of-control barbecue ends up demolishing the car of a local art dealer Astrid Weller.

Weller, keen to see more of Homer's works, introduces the concept of the outsider artist to him and Marge: 'Your husband's work is what we call outsider art, it could be by a mental patient, a hillbilly, or a chimpanzee'. The next thing we see is Homer's barbecue sculpture at the opening night of an outsider art exhibition at *The Louvre: American Style* where Mr Burns buys the sculpture and Homer is embraced by the art world as a new star. Marge begins to resent Homer's success: 'Homer being an artist was my dream, but now, without even trying, you've accomplished more in a week than I have in my whole life'.

Hot on the back of his debut success Homer presents a new body of sculpture – which includes *Old Shelving Unit with Stupid Stuck Chainsaw and Applesauce*, and *Attempted Birdhouse 1*. The body of work is panned by the audience for being self-referential, derivative, shallow, and

unoriginal: 'you've gone from hip to boring, why don't you call us when you get to kitsch' they tell him. Marge attempts to appease Homer's despair by explaining to him that, 'I know you worked hard, but all of your *things* were kind of the same...the point is that great artists are always trying new things, like Michelangelo or Shaquille O'Neal, you just need some inspiration'. They head off to the local museum to seek this inspiration, but after viewing some of the works by Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol, Homer is convinced he doesn't have what it takes to continue his artistic career: 'These guys are geniuses, I could never think of something like soup or a pencil'. In a last ditch attempt to cheer up the artist, Lisa convinces Homer that the only way to make a meaningful statement is to 'do something big and daring'. This is where Homer's manifesto begins:

Step One: Steal all the door mats in town (then use the stolen door mats to block all the town's storm water drains).

Step Two: Snorkel all the animals.

Step Three: turn on all of the fire hydrants and flood the city. (Bart remarks to Homer while they are turning on all the fire hydrants, 'are you sure this is art and not vandalism', to which Homer replies 'that's for the courts to decide son'.)

The town of Springfield wakes to find themselves surrounded by water, Homer has turned Springfield into Venice (sans the Black Plague he reminds us). Astrid Weller and her art world people declare Homer a genius to which Marge reminds him: 'they are in the business, real people might not be so understanding'.

Take yourself back to the Australia of 2002: oh the memories are so golden, John Howard reigns supreme, Ansett Airlines fold, Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* wins the Miles Franklin, Kath & Kim make their first appearance on Australian television, and Steven Bradbury comes from behind to take a Winter Olympic gold medal and in turn giving us the un-putdown-able vernacular expression, 'doing a Bradbury'. But one of the most topical issues at the time was the devastating drought, and solutions were thin on the ground, but not for some. Alan Jones, not on his own, was pushing the idea of turning Australia's inland rivers round, back on themselves, send the water back to where it came from is the way I used to think about it. Alan Jones: 'The Clarence River: Grafton's on the Clarence. The Pioneer River: Mackay's on the Pioneer River. Bundaberg, the Burdekin River. All those rivers up there. The Daly, they can all be turned inland and used. And then you can flood your river system in drought time. Dam the water. Flood the river system. Irrigate off the rivers.' (from 2GB, 22 July, 2002). Genius.

In 2003 Tony Schwensen produced the sculpture *Monument to progressing thought (after Homer Simpson)* which was included in the 2005 National Sculpture Prize at the Canberra gallery. It is my favourite work of art. Schwensen has placed a wheelbarrow atop a set of metal car ramps (the ones most commonly used by car sale yards to make the cars look like they have been flying around and are about to land). For me this sculpture is the perfect synthesis of influence (Simpson on Schwensen) and inspiration (Jones on Schwensen) and manifesto (Schwensen on Culture).

For Schwensen, *Monument to progressing thought (after Homer Simpson)*: 'is my proposition to sculpturally commemorate what might have been had this reversal of the rivers proposition been allowed to develop just a little further. It is not difficult to imagine welfare recipients being mutually obliged to wheelbarrow-loads of water to the mouth of this new attempt at water distribution to actually commence an inland water flow, and it seemed necessary then, as it does now, to have something to celebrate both our complete inability to effectively plan for real and realistic sustainable and inclusive development in any way, and our proven ability to make stupid statements without actually thinking' (taken from NGA website).

So Homer Simpson, the artist, becomes the real life influence for Schwensen's desire to produce a meaningful political comment in sculpture, the success of which lies in Simpson as the influence as

well as in the subject. So why is Schwensen still banging his head against a wall? (He did this one a couple of years before the wheelbarrow.) Maybe because of the scale and likelihood of a successful outcome of the 'turn the rivers back' project was so big and daring (and absurd) that it could only be compared to Homer Simpson's efforts at turning the city of Springfield into a magical Venice by blocking the drains with stolen doormats and turning the taps on? Is this life imitating art, or politics as a verb?

Allan Kaprow has instructed us on how to make happenings: i.e. don't do anything you know which could be considered Cultured or Arty. For Kaprow the point is, 'to make something new...something that doesn't even remotely remind you of Culture'. Kaprow says that you can steer clear of art by mixing up your happenings with life situations. 'The situations for a happening should come from the real world, from real places and people, rather than from the head. If you stick to imagination too much you'll end up with old art again.'

So in the above material we see a reversal of what Kaprow is suggesting or instructing. It's what we see when life takes imagination from art and tries to make it happen. Turn all the rivers back inland (possibly by using work-for-the-dole crews with wheelbarrows). This will send the water back to where we need it most. It's a very imaginative approach, hardly seems it could have originated from the real world.

So what has any of this to do with *Art as a Verb*? When I consider the verb-ness of the content of this exhibition: artists using fear of hygiene to get people to make art; artists creating random instructions to find ways of subverting painting; artists with formalised religious afflictions making rules; artists taking photographs of seemingly banal things and presenting them back to us (or themselves); sad artists; upside-down artists; pointing artists; lifting artists; lying down artists; vain artists; stuck artists; singings artists; waiting artists; lurching artists; punching artists; directive artists; subjective artists; walking artists; accounting artists; kissing artists; searching artists; solitary artists; and artists banging their heads against walls – when I think of all these things and all the possibilities contained within them, then I think of Homer Simpson and Tony Schwensen and what happens when two great minds think alike.

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