

Australians

Callum Morton

In a talk in Chicago a few years ago the Italian-born Francesco Bonami, curator of the 2010 Whitney Biennial, Manifesta 3 and the 50th Venice Biennale, noted ‘all Australian art is bad’.

His argument was a little incoherent, mainly, I think, because he was trying unsuccessfully to be a bit funny for his young university audience, but his point was that Australian Art (which incidentally he says is even worse than Canadian Art, so I have both covered),¹ tries too hard to display its regionalism on the surface of the work and it is *bad* because, to him, all art is the same now no matter where it comes from. He simply does not consider difference in these terms. He is interested in work that opens up new possibilities in other terrains and, in his words, if you can figure out where an artwork comes from ‘from very far away’ then it is ‘bad’.

Needless to say the argument can easily be unpacked, particularly when it has come from a curator who has influence in the trans-Atlantic epicentres and is patronised by Francois Pinault and other forces of the powerful private sphere. (He curated ‘Italics: Italian Art between Tradition and Revolution, 1968–2008’ at Palazzo Grassi).

Bonami can comfortably *not* negotiate our particular sense of place. He has never been to Australia, nor would he feel the need to come. The Venice Biennale, he says, could be curated online (I would quite like to see this). Certainly he would not feel the need to convene a forum on a subject such as the local and the global.

But let’s just look at little closer at the type of ‘badness’ he is referring to here because part of me thinks it might well be an Australian tendency to interrogate and celebrate all forms of badness. We often hear a show or a work described as *Good*



8 Callum Morton
Down the Hatch, 2003



9 Callum Morton
In the Pines, 2008



10 Callum Morton
Grotto (exterior day), 2009

Bad or *Bad Bad* as a qualification of its character. *Good Bad* tends to be either:

A. When someone is self consciously trying to do something badly in these terms (draw ‘badly’ for instance or choose a subject that is bad, unpopular or kitsch, in an effort to destabilise good taste or rediscover a playfulness in the work); or

B. When someone tries very hard to be good but gets it so wrong that it takes on another, stranger character altogether. I think here of early colonial paintings, naïve or outsider art and so on.

Bad Bad on the other hand is when someone is trying to mimic ‘good’ work in Bonami’s terms and achieves it so completely that they manage to erase all the interest from the work.

Bad Bad ignores the logic of the local. One thing is certain — Bonami’s perception of our *Badness* isn’t very good, it’s much richer than that.

Around the same time the curator of the 2008 Sydney Biennale and the most recent Documenta, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, related to me at a dinner that she had taken the eminent continental philosopher Giorgio Agamben to my work *Valhalla* in Venice and that his one word response was simply, and without any indication of inflection from her: ‘Australians.’ I asked what this meant and she simply shrugged.

It was surprising and confusing if not a little cruel of her to say this. From what little I have read and for that matter understood of Agamben I enjoy the dialectical poetics of his work and ideas. Sure a lot of it falls out as soon as it goes in — I am after all not a philosopher — but I do grasp a few things; for instance, the drive to rediscover the profane from the grip of the sacred (in capitalism) and in many ways I think that artists (particularly from here) are often engaged in a play with received ideas and forms that have the aura of the sacred swimming about them.

Indeed for some of my work I rather self-consciously devised a system for playing with and resisting the global (read

sacred) image submerging my practice. This involved imposing a series of filters that frame the process of production, a flow chart that sets out a variety of oppositional contexts in dialectical interplay—the public and the private, the local and the global, the real and the model (simulation) and, yes, the good and the bad. It is quasi-rational but is attentive to the irrational, the trivial, the perverse and the chaotic in its orbit. It is in essence a dumb research model to assist in attaining a more specific object or atmosphere, one that is specific to my place in the world. This method always takes into account where the work will be shown and places it alongside where it has come from.

But I have never been interested in finding a place between these oppositions so much as in rendering indiscernible the differences between them; that is, to sustain the conflict and irresolution, to negotiate the paradoxes if you like. This is why the non-place (similar to the one at the core of *Valhalla*) remains important to me because it is a paradoxical space that is neither public nor private but retains elements of both.

Down the Hatch

Down the Hatch (Figure 8) was a work made for a group exhibition of contemporary Australian art called ‘Face Up’ at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 2005.

The surface of the work could be described as a negative tourist image of Australia, the ‘bad’ or should I say ‘SuperBad’ aspect of the country. At first glance, and in this context, it reads as a sign of *Australianness*, and refers directly to the content of the show, acting as a type of advertisement.

It could also be read as a reiteration of familiar institutional critiques, in particular the notion of the museum as a mausoleum, something that swallows life by, in Agamben’s terms, rendering all things outmoded and ‘useless’. In this sense the work literally eats you and spits you out at the end.

But Agamben quite rightly goes further in lamenting the *museification* of the world by the religion of capitalism, through its primary industry, tourism.

This gesture that negotiates the seepage of the museological frame into our everyday lives is one I have repeated in a number of works, including those following.



11 Callum Morton
Grotto (exterior night), 2009



12 Callum Morton
Grotto (interior), 2009



13 Callum Morton
Monument #26: Settlement, 2010



14 Callum Morton
Vic Hislop Museum Hervey Bay, 2002

In the Pines (2008) (Figure 9), for the Tarrawarra Biennial, changed the function of the museum to a funeral parlour.

Grotto (2009) (Figures 10–12), a Miesean glass container, inside which is a rocky crypt that functions as a bar and café in Tilburg in the Netherlands (the spectator, who is simultaneously the patron, descends into the bar from the geometric to the organic plane).

Monument #26: Settlement (Figure 13), a provisional shelter rendered solid as a type of sarcophagus in a corner of the gallery.

Back to Down the Hatch

But underneath the generic surface of the shark heads was in fact a very specific object. In 2004 I had holidayed at Fraser Island in Queensland with my family and visited Hervey Bay, home to Vic Hislop's Great White Shark Exhibition, a private museum dedicated to the exploits of one man and his war with sharks (Figure 14).

Imaged as a type of Captain Ahab or indeed the paranoiac Sam Quint from the film *Jaws* (1975), Vic in his heady days used to set off in a 16-foot dinghy with a shotgun and chains on board and drag back white pointers and tiger sharks, either for money or simply to rid the planet of this beast. Compared to the 'good' Steve Irwin, 'The Crocodile Hunter', whose emphasis always remained ecological and protective (though the spectacle of his exploits was similarly privileged), Hislop represents a 'bad', gnarlier version, a type of *Wolf Creek* on water.

This shark head is the entrance to his museum. So I sutured a 'featuristic' (in Robin Boyd's terms) fragment copied from a private museum in a small Australian town that survives exclusively on tourism, onto the surface of a public one in Berlin for a show that linked the artists together under the rubric of cultural tourism.

Incidentally it emerged a few years ago that Hislop was the one supplying tiger sharks to Damien Hirst for the editioned versions of *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* and when he learnt the price the work sold for was wont to say, 'Shit, I threw in the last tiger shark for free!'

Valhalla

Valhalla (Figures 15 & 16) was a work made as part of the Australian representation for the 52nd Venice Biennale. It is a three-quarter scale replica of the family home that my architect father designed in the 1970s in Australia, which was destroyed by developers in 2006 and replaced, ironically, with another version of the modernist home, what one might call 'developer modern'. So I brought the house back from the dead as it were and reconstructed it on the other side of the world on an old Armenian soccer pitch. Only it didn't return as it was but rather, as the dead tend to do, a bit rotten, torched and shot through with holes. It was as if it had been dragged through a portal that saw it reappear as a media image, removed from any emotional attachment I might have had to it.

The interior of the work (Figure 17) was a corporate foyer with three lifts that shuttle up and down and can be called with the push of a button. They arrive but never open. In the photo there is a type of gatekeeper who doesn't acknowledge anyone's presence and goes about their business in silence.

Here again I was rendering a private space (my own) as a public one but cast as a type of negative theme park ride where nothing really happens. Indeed the non-place at the heart of *Valhalla* is a 'limbo' space or 'space of judgement'. Agamben refers to this as a space of 'non-meaning' which precisely describes the emptiness of this lobby space for the spectator waiting for the doors to open or, in fact, anything to happen at all.

I was also interested here in the traffic of cultural forms, in this case in International-style architecture. The building was typical of much 1970s modernism in Melbourne, a truth to materials brutalism gleaned from the reformist modernity of figures like Louis Kahn, the Smithsons and principally Le Corbusier (in particular from his later works, *Ronchamp*, the Monastery at Tourette and the buildings of the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh among others). In this case this building type is given a local inflection through a subtle shift in materiality and the planting of native gardens. So I was in a sense resurrecting not just the house and my teenage history, but also a politics of form.

So what did Agamben mean when he used the word



15 Callum Morton
Valhalla (exterior), 2007



16 Callum Morton
Valhalla (exterior), 2007



17 Callum Morton
Valhalla (interior), 2007

'Australians' when encountering this work? Did he simply read the exaggeration and scale (and expense) of the work as particularly Australian? Was he reading our politics of immigration and saddling me and all Australians with the baggage?

One thing I imagine is he didn't throw up his hands up in ecstasy, embrace Carloyn and shout to the heavens that one word 'Australians!' as if to say 'Thank Plato for their contribution to culture and ideas!' All I tend to hear is the voice of my Italian-Australian brother-in-law with his Veneto-laced impression of him — 'Australiani!' — complete with hand gestures of exasperation and dismissal.

Still I decided that I might pursue a response from him. I know that this is a rather cringey Aussie thing to do, to ask others what they think of us, but I wanted discourse not the paranoid silence I have grown so accustomed to reading as an artist. I emailed Carolyn to see if she might pass on his contact details so I could ask him.

Sadly I never received a reply from her. It was not surprising I suppose. It was after all a private moment between them that she delivered to me, the ambience of which is impossible to read, and it is one that he would more than likely not remember. She delivered the message and disappeared.

In its place, however, in the absence of Agamben, I did the other truly Australian thing: I contacted the experts at home (none of whom, incidentally, even after publishing a collection of essays on Agamben's work and editing the *Agamben Dictionary*, have ever heard from him either).

The general consensus among them was that he wasn't reading the political sphere, so much as being trivial! In this instance, in this private moment, he was the same as Bonami in his regard for Australians.

In fact, to one of these experts the comment indicates that Agamben subscribes to the idea that Australians are, as he puts it, 'tryhard blowins' who just don't get European art and thought. In his estimation it is the master / slave dialectic and the slave is always 'bad'.

In one sense I don't disagree with either Bonami or Agamben. I want to render a psychological space more than a national one, I want my work to remain open and not be so easily reconciled by a word. A continuum and development

of ideas is better than the Oedipal erasure we tend to perform with regularity here. But for all my secret desire to want to let my work simply be good in their terms (and by the way—I do always try hard), I have never been able to let it alone. I feel that I need to pick at it, to make it into something other than a version of that which is elsewhere, to exaggerate its instability. My work is, in Claire Bishop's terms, often 'antagonistic' (political) rather than 'convivial' (read ethical). I don't want to make or define a national object but I do want to have a dialogue with the local, because in a sense everything isn't global now it's local.

I am not sure in the end that I would like a true exchange with a thinker like Agamben or indeed with a curator like Bonami. That one word is probably enough to forever make me feel as I have often felt in Europe and America. Bad.

Notes

- 1 I was born in Montreal, Canada, in 1965.