

Art as Transformation. Echoes of the Past.

Thoughts on Double Venturi's "The Current", a music and art collaborative event performed on Sunday 4 June 2006 at the Melbourne Town Hall.

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Once upon a time there was an organ – a huge organ. It was grand and it sat with 10.000 pipes occasionally breathing in and out right in the middle of Melbourne. Sometimes it breathed so rarely that people thought it had exhaled its last breath. But then there was something about that organ that nobody wanted to let die. People got very sentimental about this empty headed crowd pleaser, all pipes and gadgetry, silent most of the time despite its enormous decibel capabilities. People lavished it with attention, musicians received commissions to keep it breathing. Slowly it became an instrument of the present, as well as the past.

I began this piece of writing as a response to seeing Double Venturi's performance "The Current" at The Melbourne Town Hall in 2006.

Below, I have described and outlined some of the themes that the performance brought up for me particularly in respect to the possibilities of a pertinent dialogue between Australia's colonial history and the contemporary art world. With the work of Joseph Beuys in mind, I attempted this description with the intention of tentatively outlining a distinct role for the artist/composer/sculptor in Australia; in particular, the artist as "enchanter". In addition, though not secondarily, I have tried to convey how it felt to experience The Current for the purposes of remembering; so that the ephemeral might be held.

As I know I approach art across my own psychological prejudice it is perhaps helpful to know what the nature of my remembering is? My background is in art history; an education which has led to a specialization in the visual arts of art and architecture. This is problematic on this occasion because "The Current" was an event of music as well as visual art. This piece of writing leans more towards the visual impact of the event than the aural, and I am afraid does not describe or contextualize the music to my satisfaction, nor I am sure, more importantly, to that of the musically-minded. Because of the "meanings" I have drawn from The Current it seems pertinent to state, in addition, that I am an English woman living in Australia for the last twelve years and that I frequently find myself wrestling with feelings of displacement and disorientation. Like those of the colonial mind, my eyes appraise everything they see through a veil of homesickness. I know the Anglo-Australian psychosis because I embody it.

Reframing the past. The Six Pieces.

The Current was a collaborative event held by artists and musicians which occurred twice for two hours on a Sunday June 4 2006 in the Melbourne Town Hall. Double Venturi is a creative collaboration founded as a concept five years ago by Peter Knight and Cameron Robbins out of the desire to present a space where contemporary composers and artists could come together to produce music and art collaborative projects. In doing so Double Venturi's projects break down the boundaries between music and art as well as challenging the notion of single authorship. A "venturi" is a cone-shaped device in engines that was invented by a physicist to increase the pressure of liquid or gas; it was used in double form in a fire sculpture in Double Venturi's first collaborative project in 2001.

The artist/musician collective changes for every piece of which there have been a previous eight. For "The Current" the artist/composers were Catherine Clover, David Murphy, Cameron Robbins, Robbie Rowlands, Erik

Griswold, Peter Knight, Kate Neal, Vanessa Tomlinson, with Adrian Sherriff, Martin MacKerras and Eugene Ughetti performing music for the piece *Double Interchange*. Erik Griswold, an American born composer, was commissioned independently by the City of Melbourne to write a piece for the Grand Organ which was played as the final piece of the event.

All are long term residents of Australia, the majority from Melbourne itself. “The Current” was presented as six pieces of performance/visual/musical material positioned in various sites throughout the Town Hall, to which the audience was led, or rather pumped, settling for a time in each space, to be rushed off to the next experience. The pieces were experienced in different orders, depending in which group one found oneself (the audience was split into two at the start to be reunited at the end for Griswold’s music). They were independent works, linked by the spectator/ listener’s physical path and mind. The title “The Current” plays on a presiding theme of the present versus the past as in “current time” but current also captures the felt experience of this performance: as a member of its audience one was directed to flow from space to space with some haste, pooling in one place only to sense movement again; another door opening; the audience: a roving mob; following in the well worn paths of the endless public tours that such buildings attract but in a very different spirit.

A visiting English person commented in reference to “The Current” that an equivalent art performance event would be unimaginable in a large city in England because no Town Council “would let a group of artists roam free around its Town Hall”. Is this because the City of Melbourne is less conservative than its English counterpart? Is it because the City of Melbourne needs the revenue that renting the Town Hall brings in and is indiscriminate? Is it that nobody in Australia is really listening to what its artists are saying anyway for unlike Europe, artists in Australia have no history of anti-establishment political affiliations alighting dangerous political unrest. Viewed as harmless revolutionaries in a country of apathetic audiences perhaps it is only in Australia that one could find a group of highly skilled contemporary visual and aural artists let loose in a coveted central historical site. Perhaps artists with different reputations would have met with more resistance from the Town Hall? The obvious question that is begged is:

What were the members of Double Venturi saying?

Double Venturi’s “The Current” was a series of contemporary art and musical dialogues with the Melbourne Town Hall, in all its colonial glory. The six pieces shared their site-specificity; ephemeral and dependent on The Melbourne Town Hall (with its history, its décor and its function) as their defining context. They were not six separate works in the sense that one might find in the separate rooms of an art gallery. Though the pieces were viewable as distinct and independent on one level there was a sense of a collective enterprise that shall be discussed later. The symbiosis of sound and art in the pieces was central to the process of the event and it is interesting as a documenter to find the visual and aural components of the piece unusually matched in their ephemerality due to the live performance nature of the event. It is very unfortunate that my lack of experience with writing about music so limits my ability to transpose the compositions and performances of the Double Venturi composers into words adequately. The Current’s balancing act of visual and aural is maintained by the visual part of the event no longer existing in the world as an actual material thing beyond the performance, much as the music does not inhabit physical space. Because the event occurred for two hours twice, the artists were presented with an unusually brief physical existence for their work. For the musicians the latter conditions were generous in terms of performing a new piece twice in the public arena.

It was challenging to describe in words the whole multi-media experience of the pieces themselves because of being immersed in a number of sensual experiences at one time. Nevertheless, the works were experienced independently in different spaces, and defined by their own time, with a beginning and an end, so in the following, I have written a description of the pieces individually, and commented later on the event as a whole.

Robbie Rowlands *The Organist* Main Hall

On 1 February 1925 the Grand Organ and a large part of the Main Hall in the Town Hall was destroyed in a fire. In 2006, Robbie Rowlands projected photographs of the hall's remains following the fire on to suspended hanging screens in the middle of the space. Three sculptural pieces are spotlit around the space. The atmosphere is melancholy and ghoulish; perhaps it is because of the vast size of the space, which denies any intimacy, or perhaps it is how the photographs are reminiscent of post-war images, with blurred silhouettes of people from the past, and dark shadows. One photo clearly shows the sky through the great curved beams of the ceiling where the roof has burnt away. The audience glides slowly around the on the polished parquet floor of the Great Hall; a few people sit on the floor to gaze at the fading and returning screen images, listening to the sound scape of a bleep and the rumbling vibration of something..... Dimly spotlit in the murkiness, Eric Griswold brings soft, gentle sounds out of the organ, the audiences first aural encounter with the sleeping giant. Concentrated on his work, head bent down, apparently unaware of the public gaze, half lit up, he appears as the ghost of the organ who lives on; an apparition from the past. In the darkened hall, a number of sculptural objects are subtly spot lit in places around the hall: a Victorian-style wooden chair is twisted into new forms, its back rest curled back perhaps melted from heat. One of the photographs shows a charred pile of the same chairs following the fire. With the parquet floor as its pedestal, a large number of uniform, small, rectangular pieces of charcoal (the alchemical by-product of the fire) are arranged in an elegant geometry; a throwaway display of sculptural virtuosity: mathematical and clean, a computers idea of a fire. The layout is the symbol of the swastika as used in Buddhist iconography; a allusion to the transient nature of all things. In contrast to the ancient, in another spotlit area a pile of wiry technology lies dumped in a heap, and from it emanates an eerie aural pulse, a sound distinctly of modernity, subterranean, a ticking away, second after second.

What does Rowlands' piece present? Perhaps: What happens to history when monuments of the past burn down in a fire? Can history burn? And who of us would secretly like to be lighting a match to these monuments of colonial history? For a moment was there the possibility to let the Australian sun shine again on the land where the Duke of Edinburgh laid the first stone of the foundations; to let the clear blue sky replace the arched wooden ceilings? But the municipalities of 1929 failed to take the opportunity of renewal. They rebuilt a hall identical to the past one; "re-encasing" Melbourne's central ceremonial space in a Victorian outfit.

David Murphy *Bringing the organ out; watching air as music* The Melbourne Town Hall Grand Organ and
Eric Griswold *Cleaning out the cobwebs/ Kicking up the dust* The Melbourne Town Grand Organ

Eric Griswold was commissioned independently; sought out by the City of Melbourne to compose a piece of new music for its beloved Grand Organ. This was performed at the end of the event when all the visitors were brought back together in the Main Hall. Griswold also played the organ for the period of Murphy's Grand Organ tour. The Grand Organ is divided into a series of gantries at three separate levels with stairs and platforms from which to peruse its inner workings. Murphy's piece facilitated the visitor to directly experience the extraordinary mechanical complexity of the organ by walking through it while its pipes are whistling and its pumps are pumping.

The organs pipes peep and bellow, moving with jerks and shudders and soon I feel the sense of a personality emerging from this instrument where air currents are causing everything to dance. I meet Murphy on the stairs smiling, he is a man in love. He urges us to keep moving, no dawdling on the stairs, free of comment; "the organ is yours as it is mine" the piece says to me. The spirit of this piece is far from the reverent and possessive tones of a historical tour, weighty with proud historical detail or fact. No numbers or figures clutter the mind. Motored by two electrical motors, this is the Grand Organ as of 2006. Together the artists worked to keep their audience running, to collectively breathe fresh air into this place.

Experienced from the vantage point of the Great Hall with swathes of white silk, hung down to dance and gulp with the currents of the air, Erik Griswold's *Cleaning out the cobwebs; Kicking up the dust* buzzes with a vibrancy and building sense of climax; a melody repeats and the rhythm gallops with a lumbering stride. My vocabulary for describing such musical eloquence is sadly inadequate so I can only describe how it felt. The air is filled with a joyful, intense sound; full of anticipation and vitality, Griswold's is a black silhouette conjuring a popstar cool, new to this arena. The organ is alive with currents of its own, electric motors powering its pipes, this piece is to bring the organ out into sunlight, the melody climbing and dropping sees the organ stretched and exhibiting all its tonal possibilities: it hasn't been so hip since it saw Mark Atkins and Phillip Glass in 2001. Again the alchemy is undertaken to transform the great beast of European Christian culture into a contemporary wonder, the dancing dinosaur of kinetic sculpture, the beloved of musicians and aestheticians alike. As David Murphy comments (unashamedly besotted by the grand organ and talking much as a lover would, delighting in anatomic detail), "it was only when I went into its chambers that it dawned on just how massive, complex and utterly beautiful it was from the inside that it was so sad that the likes of the Vox Humana and Tibia Clausa were only heard and rarely seen... Seeing sound, especially music, is an ongoing preoccupation of mine."

It seems everybody loves a big organ (or is that just a myth?).

Peter Knight *Notice* The Old Council Chambers

In the hallowed space of the chamber rooms the cushioned leather seats are organized in long crescents of joined thrones centred around a triad of enormous carved wooden arm chairs with high backs facing the group over expansive leather inlaid tables. The décor is designed to create a sense of weighty business in every sense, physical and mental with the seats clearly delineating hierarchy. The audience, demur suddenly, quietly fills the seats. A few important looking books lie open in front of them, how polite and shy the people become, hushed by the seriousness of the iconography.

In the air one can here the sounds of a very different landscape, the sounds of birds, of frogs, of the wind; the world beyond this tiny one. Two images of water and leaves by fellow artists are positioned a little behind and above the seats of the highest temporal authority, suggesting the invisible presence of an higher authorities still, the true caretakers of the land, finally represented. Amongst the sounds of the land as it was before the Town Hall was built, comes the mumbling, deep murmurs of mens' voices speaking English, samplings from a sixty-year old recording of a Chambers session. Suddenly the air is filled with more than just sound as shredded paper begins to drift like feathers down on to the heads of the people, cast by silent performers in the balcony. People remain still for a while: the room commands respect, it says "we are very important people here doing very important business, our arses on animal hides, no place for being silly". But finally the paper is mounting in huge piles on peoples' heads, to walk is to become a snow plough, and it tickles. And here comes the humour again of Double Venturi's conversation with this strange building. Finally it tickles so much that people start to throw the paper at each other. These documents, these pieces of paper that rule our civilisation's notions of good and bad, the clean white squares that are the carriers of literacy and numeracy which for so many were the resounding proof of unquestionable superiority of the European over the "Primitive". *Notice* re-presents the official document as but this: bunches of papery nothing to be hurled and kicked. Is this a deleted scene from Alice in Wonderland? I feel liberated and light-headed; the work is so delightfully mocking of the patriarchal pomp. A child asks an adult to move out of the judge's seat so she can sit there. People flit through the hefty law books like magazines in a waiting room. It is a happy, messy anarchy.

But some people sit quite still with their white wigs, enduring.

Cameron Robbins and Kate Neal *Faux Organa* The Lady Mayoress's Chambers

Hastened out of the Council Chambers, the audience is collected for an interim period in a large ornate and windowless room in which stands a miniature, transparent model of the Grand Organ. The enormous creature in which we had climbed has shrunk into a tiny, glass simulacrum; Alice's Wonderland has nothing on this place. This is not "the art" though, this is just a room being a room, for soon we are all ushered out into a smaller, plushly decorated drawing room; the décor of which speaks of afternoon teas and polite conversation. Photographs of cricket teams are on the wall and European style oil paintings. Some of the audience sits on the thick apricot pile carpet; I find myself perched with others on a pink velvet chaise lounge; a cosy closeness arises amongst the audience who are squashed into shoulder rubbing intimacy by the small size of the room. Pressed against the far wall, flanked by overly ornate Japanese/Victoriana lamps, a machine of some complexity confronts us. The composer Neal (founder of The Dead Horse Band) and sculptor Cameron Robbins have constructed a "recorder organ" from around 20 recorders connected to a bellows by black plastic pipe and gaffer tape. The recorders all stand upright, mouthpieces down in a long line. There is no ornate façade to this organ; its inside is its outside. The artists kneel down to gently pull a lever to allow each recorder to sing out. The air is filled with a pure steady note, and then another and another as each recorder is allowed to sing out, with Neal and Robbins on their knees pulling the levers one by one. Then another rhythm begins; a tray of tea cups and wine glasses begins to rattle, and between them a lady's hat spins around and around on a stick. A dinner gong now begins to sound, motored by another machine; Robbins moves to check on the mechanics and looks for a moment like an anxious butler behind the wine glasses. It is funny; the Lady Mayoress is rattling away, the parties of the past are invoked. The invisible tensions of the room are a crescendoing cacophony.

The decoration of this room and its iconography is so strong as to cast meaning through the music and sculpture of this work. The room almost has the character of a stage set, like some scene from a production of an Ibsen play and it has that similar strange quality of a public space pretending to be intimate. Robbins comments that he made the piece in response to being in the room: "I went into the room and started to hear recorders. I like recorders, they are like birds, and they are simple, with no moving parts". When the recorder-organ is in full flood, Kate Neal picks up a recorder and begins to play, an improvised piece in response to the music of their organ. On and on Neal plays, her own song, which sounds fresh and melodious next to either of the organ's drone. And the iconography of the recorder? The instrument of the poor folk's songs: of the oppressed Celtic nations, of the Pagan forest lovers: all the bitter enemies of the English ruling classes. Next to this tiny wooden recorder, played with such bird like dexterity, Grand Organ is contrasted as absurd and gross; interminably bound to the earth – unable to flee – a great flightless bird next to the dancing light-footed recorder. The recorder and the woman walk free – the Pipes of Pan are evoked and suddenly the piece speaks of forests and of nature, and of the flowing balm of feminine diplomacy. The complexity of the Grand Organ appears laughable, the artists invite gentle mockery, the humour brings a flood of relief. Perhaps the anglo-australian settlers could be viewed as ridiculous and funny.

Catherine Clover and Vanessa Tomlinson *Double Interchange* Stair Well and Lifts

A cool, hollow space. A spiral of beautiful marble, white steps; up and down are both pooled in darkness. Perhaps this vertical tunnel leads interminably up, as far as the moon which its stark white stillness evokes, or endlessly down into the cool depths of the earth where the lifts plunge, reminiscent of a mine shaft. The shadows flicker as the old elevators whoosh up and down on their thick metal cords. The audience has by now curled around the stairwell, to have become stationary and sit together, folded up on the steps. At first it seems that perhaps the audience is simply listening to the motion of up and down but the creaking of the lift seems to be growing louder as Tomlinson's composition emerges from the echoes and clankings. Musicians emerge from the elevator stepping in and out of the doors to solemnly plod up and down the stairs apparently unaware of the audience that quietly stands and sits on the stairs. The music is rich and full of forlorn stretches of notes, with sporadic percussion, stick on metal. It is harmonious and soothing, as well as slightly spooky because of the context and of the musicians who appear and disappear in and out of a lift, where the sound becomes muffled or a percussive rattle occasionally bursts forth. And then again a solitary trombonist appears from the dark below to trudge slowly upwards. It is an

aural poem of dynamics, of fading and rising tones, long moans which the lift shaft responds to; reminiscent of a whale song.

Against one of the walls is a visual piece by Clover: a projected image of a kaleidoscope begins to emerge (Clover's animation of a digital image of the lift grill) an ephemeral painting in light which hypnotizes the viewer with its slow transformation from one geometry to the next. As further celebration to the beauty of the antique lift Clover lights up the usually dark the ornate geometric moldings of the lifts shaft. Watching the mechanics creaking and whizzing is to be transported into stillness. The sense of the vertical space is articulated by the moans of the brass instruments which resound in the darkness, growing fainter and louder as the lift rises and sinks.

This piece has a feeling of separation from the rest of the building; stark, monochrome and cool in contrast to the hot, carpeted, opulence of the other spaces; stripped of signs; elemental (marble and steel); other. It is the moon against the sun. Could it be that the stairwell, clean and minimal, is the space where the contemporary visitor might find themselves today most comfortable in the Town Hall.....untroubled by the traumatic associations which come with the trappings and the excrescences of colonial taste. The artists augment the quiet with their mutual understatement.

The music is of the elevator. The art is of the elevator. Tomlinson and Clover's work share a particular sensitivity to site so that there is an air of listening that the musician and artist mutually invoke to make it a striking example of the aural and visual working together in a grand harmony.

Shared themes: Ghosts and that Big Organ

Double Venturi does not make any explicit statement about their intention in what they write about their pieces. A refreshing quality of understatement unites the works if anything. Yet there are themes: ghosts, the omnipresence of the Grand Organ and the shared context of the Town Hall.

Interestingly, all the artists seem to pick up on the existence of spectres from the past living on unnaturally in the Town Hall. Every piece shares this sense of ghostly presence: ghouls on the stairwell plod slowly past us to the sounds of rattling chains and creaking metal: a disembodied hat in the drawing room spins on its own to the haunting moan of the recorder; invisible phantoms cast paper from the balconies of the chambers; white screens float invisibly suspended in the murky darkness of the Main Hall; and Griswold's composition can be read as a positive exorcism; a wild gothic vision as the music builds and circles, breathing life into twenty foot long white, silk ghosts which whoosh and ripple in the light.

The Grand Organ is central to four of the six pieces. Prior to the event, I had always tended to feel repulsed by the Grand Organ that resides in the centre of the Melbourne Town Hall; seeing it as another miserable example of misplaced homesick-driven energy. The original organ was made in England and shipped on a 56 day journey across the oceans and then installed over nine months to be opened on 1872. Finally civilization could be seen and heard in all its Northern European glory, a masterpiece of engineering and advancement. In 1925, when it burnt down completely, the ever nervous settlers were faced with a hole that perhaps terrified them. Perhaps the fire's rapid transformation of the organ into charcoal expressed too well their fear that their recently erected symbols of civilization could be destroyed so easily and quickly. The fire left hardly a trace; could it all really be so tenuous, so surface, so ephemeral? But, not to be discouraged, within four years and at enormous cost, William and Son and Norman and Beard of London (the original builders of the 1872 predecessor) were commissioned to rebuild the organ. Just as the first had in 1872, an English organ made the journey across the ocean to Australia. Installed, it stood 9.75 metres high, with 6074 pipes, two electric motors. It has been described as one of the "finest Late English Romantic Concert Organs in the World"¹. The Main Hall was rapidly rebuilt resplendent in fake Italian fresco and faux Victoriana; the official line was clear: "nothing would change".

In 1997, four and a half million dollars was spent on this flightless bird of ours, when it sat unplayable and in disrepair. After a trip to America, it returned four years later back in action. In 2006, a pride is still detectable in the City of Melbourne's advertising material so keen to point out that following its painstaking restoration in

¹ Jack Bethard, organ builder. ibid

1997, the Grand Organ now “includes approximately ten thousand pipes”. Ten thousand pipes hey? But who cares?

In 1997 the Heritage Committee specified only two recommendations for its organ:

1. The façade should not be changed.
2. The organ should speak with its original voice.

It would seem that the spirit against change that saw the organ being built originally in 1872 and rebuilt in 1925, continues to live on into 1997.

Another theme that the works shared for me was around how The Melbourne Town Hall functions on an emotional historical level in the present day: a question amplified by the shared title “The Current”.

The Melbourne Town Hall is as close to a bona-fide historical monument as is to be found in these parts: a standard product of homesick intruders creating an architecture based on half-remembered notions of European grandeur. The Melbourne Town Hall is a Victorian monstrosity that chafes and offends at every turn, ideologically and aesthetically. It is “steeped in history”² like a tea bag left too long in pot. It speaks loudly of devoted, homesick subjects that can see nothing in their new land but the absence of their old; of a patriarchal society eager to create as much pomp and seriousness around the edifices of their legislative bodies in order to legitimize as quickly as possible their own illegitimate behaviour in this country. The visual shock of colonial architecture in Australia is perhaps greater for me than for those who grow up with it because I know the place from where it originates so intimately. With its pseudo-classicism and red carpets, it appears to me as an expression of a host of cultural assumptions around concepts of “Culture” and “Civilisation”. The latter can be seen to underpin the destruction which was visited on Australia by its new settlers, for the finely balanced eco-system on which they happened, together with the extraordinary tribal culture with a land-sourced spiritual life and ephemeral person-made structures, were the antithesis of “European-ness” and invisible to Europeans for being so.

In 1867, the Duke of Edinburgh was invited from overseas to lay the first stone of the Town Hall’s foundations. It was completed in 1870; the portico added in 1887. Since then it has been restored and maintained with a taste for nostalgia which looks back to the days when the British ruling classes held the hegemonic reins. Photographs of cricket teams adorn the walls and gold leaf embossed carvings of the Lord Mayors names flank the entry stairs, impressing on the visitor the value system of status and power for the founders of this building.

To choose old heritage building such as the Melbourne Town Hall (or Old Melbourne Gaol as was done by a group of artists in Melbourne 1998) is to bring these questions to the absolute forefront of discussion. These hefty, meaning-laden contexts sees the artist/musician’s work whisked away from the blank canvas of the gallery space which still presides as the semi-sacred rightful place for art in Western mainstream art practice. Instead here we find artists and composers placing their work in an already dense thicket of signs and meanings well before their own work has even begun. By entering this site we find Double Venturi’s members in the heartland of Melbourne’s mythology, tackling cultural memories head on, and dialoguing directly with difficult unresolved cultural wounds.

Joseph Beuys’ work and his philosophy is alluded to below. This is not to imply that Double Venturi are following in a tradition or have a collective manifesto in which a certain approach is condoned. It is because in my opinion Beuys’ art and words provide a helpful vocabulary to discuss how the contemporary artist/musician can interact with the political/cultural climate they find themselves working in.

²The opening lines to the Victorian Government promotional material for the town hall www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=55&pg=746.

Joseph Beuys and Chemical Reactions

Beuys once said of his art:

“I want it to work like a chemical reaction in the psyche of the visitor”³

He urged artists to attempt a spiritual alchemy through their art works (the latter term embracing all creative products), in every stage of the process: in the making, in the viewing, in every interaction, with every person at every stage. In the Town Hall, the cumulative effect of Double Venturi’s pieces, intentionally or not, was to effect a momentary but lasting transformation of a dislocated and unresolved space in a place of poetry, melody and wordless contemplation. The Town Hall, which prior to “The Current” filled me with a sort of wincing embarrassment, became filled with fresh associations and with humour, brought about by an art culture brave enough to laugh out loud at the establishment and to collectively work in the realms the non-expressed, the spiritual consciousness and conflicting feelings shared by many of the visitors. The works of Double Venturi collectively, and perhaps not intentionally in a sense of a shared manifesto, engaged with our socio-cultural complexes around identification with colonial ancestors. In this respect Double Venturi shares Beuysian notion of the role of the artist as caretaker of society’s feeling and emotional arena in particular around the areas of political and social traumas (Beuys’ Nazi beginnings taught him about buried social guilt and denial, which Australian history suffers from in a somewhat parallel way). It was in this function that Beuys felt that art and artists were imperative to society as a combined political and healing force; Caroline Tisdall writes:

“Beuys often spoke of his desire to make creativity as essential to society as economics so that it would no longer be buried in arts pages and on the periphery of society. Art as a transformative process.”⁴

Beuys most famously declared “everybody an artist” wishing on all individuals the experience of the freedom and connection of creativity which he felt to lie within all of us:

“Everyone is a king, the value of people lies in their sovereignty. The longing of people for their inner god is destroyed in these materialist times.”

However in a “materialist society” where a climate of rationality stamps out individuals’ alignment with their instincts, feelings and consciousness, Beuys wrote that the artists’ role emerged as more significant than ever as an antidote to this prevailing materialism: the artist as a sort of shamanic go-between between the psyche of the present day society and a deeper spiritual reality. One description of his of the artist role was as “the enchanter”. He declared

“Now, when everyone speaks rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear”.

As an “enchanter” the artist or creative producer had a vital a role in helping a society process its collective complexes and traumas. Beuys loved Rudolf Steiner and the Dalai Lama. The three men all shared an awareness that feelings and higher consciousness were the casualties of a society of science and reason and that the Western mind’s addiction to rationality had allowed for so many other modes of being in the world to be destroyed, including the Earth herself. In cultures where feeling and spirituality mingle with the rational, it perhaps makes no sense to have a distinct cultural zone for “the creative” which the word “art” in our culture denotes. In indigenous culture there is no word that parallels our word “art” perhaps because there is no distinction between the creative, feeling world and the material everyday.

Beuys’ low opinion of the dominance of rationality is ever pertinent to the Colonial History from which the Town Hall sprouts if one recalls how the English were apt to rationalize the devastation it wrought every step of the way, on people and landscapes alike; freely legislating its own actions in the Council Chambers. The Town Hall can be seen to symbolize on one level the British belief that they had an unalienable right to impose European

³ “Tallow” Munster, 1977

⁴ Caroline Tisdall, Joseph Beuys We Go This Way, Violette Editions, London 1998, p. 88

values wherever they settled down, to the very bad misfortune of the First People, the forests and the mountains of Australia. Furthermore the homesickness to which its décor and design pertains is the same homesickness which underlay the viscious, spectacular disregard which the new settlers showed for the aboriginal inhabitants feelings for their home. Speaking from personal experience, I know that the dark side of chronic homesickness is irrational resentment for other people's sense of comfort at being at home and finally a devaluing of all that is of the place where one finds oneself (I plant European trees and shrubs in my garden and semi-unconsciously try to turn Australia into England). The latter phenomenon can be seen on a macrocosmic level in the history colonization of Australia by the English in the 19th Century, but also on a tiny scale in the comments of retired English "professionals" in the South of France or Spain complaining about "the locals".

Today conservatism in contemporary Australia is a diseased limb of its culture, but as Double Venturi show, it is not at its heart. Conservatism impinges on the present by hankering for a bygone Golden Age; an age which in truth never was Golden. It requires a lot of energy from Heritage Committees and other history makers to perpetuate the mythologies of heroism and nobility in early colonial history, rather than homesickness and displaced rage. Furthermore, this process of the political right to continually deny a darker reality, can be seen to cause a knock on effect throughout the way Australian's relate to the past. Reason becomes divorced from reality and a form of history emerges which causes us to repress basic feelings and deny our human values. One manifestation of the latter could be seen in Australian dominant culture in its geographically inexplicable preoccupation with its relationship to Europe and America as opposed its Asian neighbours. Another might be the surprising trouble it has moving away from the notion of the male Anglo-Australian as the rightful heir to this country. There are many examples in this country's dominant cultural beliefs where reason and reality have lost contact a long time ago. Easter festivals of rebirth in Autumn, Winter Solstice iconography in the middle of Summer; why does Australian dominant culture persist with these irreconcilable concepts?

Non-indigenous Australians generally adopt one of the following paths to navigate the colonial past of this country: by either accepting a glorified mythology of the Early Settlers with its accompanying misplaced nostalgia and racism or by suffering guilt-ridden feelings of shame and self-loathing as children of the white invaders, only then to struggle with an accompanying sense of displacement and cultural cringe. But the possibilities of reframing the past and changing the present with a combination of humour, poetry and blasting energy are themes that Double Venturi send echoing around this fusty building and its huge organ. And Double Venturi fights valiantly for our momentary possession of the Grand Organ, to liberate it from its Victorian laces and open it up to enable us to perceive all afresh.

Art works such as Double Venturi's offer new subtle emotional pathways for us to navigate the delicate terrain of identification with our European history, in contrast to the more prevailing and, ultimately untenable, cultural approaches. Contemporary art and music is by its nature contemporary. The best of it uses a vocabulary of signs and references with acute awareness of what it is saying rather than the soporific repetition of motifs from the past which dictates the aesthetic of colonial art and architecture (as well as much of the weakest, more imitative contemporary art).. Contemporary art and music open up difficult questions without closure and invite multiple interpretations. This is characterized in this event by a finely judged absence of proselytism and wordy explanation. The artists and musicians share a confidence in their work's ability to speak and perhaps more significantly, a confidence in their audience's ability to understand, without their mediation. An approach proclaimed by Beuys in 1970:"Unity in Diversity"; summarized by Caroline Tisdall, is the notion that opposite ideas can coexist despite the low opinion of this in Western thinking. "The Current" does not tell the audience what to think or what to feel. It opens up a space, on many levels.

The collective represent an instance of creative cooperation and a welcome goodbye to an presiding notion of a hierarchy of vision over sound, or sound over vision which still occurs in many cultural forms. The synthesis of music and art and, apparently of the collaborators themselves, adds to a feeling of optimism and united strength which imbues the whole piece; the Grand Organ is shown as a beast of the past and a door to the future; the Town Hall: a symbol of early colonial injustice coexisting, for one Sunday, as a site of contemporary spiritual renaissance

In conclusion

The philosopher Theodore Adorno famously remarked that lyric poetry was no longer possible after Auschwitz. Similarly the associations of the Town Hall presented to Double Venturi the pertinent and wider-reaching question of how does a contemporary Australian artist enter into a dialogue with a tradition that is the living expression of a despicable regime from the past? Or, how do you make art in a building that is a living emblem of a shameful disregard for the original people and the spirit of the land? Just as Beuys unashamedly addressed what he felt to be festering cultural wounds of the society at large such as the impact of Naziism and a whole range of regrettable human events⁵, Double Venturi's "Current" represents a rare pull-together by the Australian contemporary art world to visit its collective alchemical might on a local site of trauma and injury. Double Venturi's "Current" announces the transformative nature of art and music in this sort of role. And with this announcement comes the possibility for a contemporary Australian person to experience the Town Hall anew as a place of poetry and music, aesthetic textures and harmonies while still acknowledging that it was built by hands that wrote deceptive treatises and oversaw unspeakable acts of genocide.

In 2006, a group of contemporary artists and musicians fill the Town Hall with their work. It is transformed by their touch, without closure or force, a new way of being in Australia is presented. And the stuff of the process? It eludes rational explanation.

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Bibliography

A Passion for This Earth: Exploring a New Partnership of Man, Woman & Nature, Valerie Andrews, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1990.

Joseph Beuys We Go This Away, Caroline Tisdall, Violette Editions, London, 1998

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⁵Beuys' works are united by an emotional and spiritual meaning, calling for a connection with our higher consciousness and an urge for the visitor to feel the mystery of place and material, an ability he wanted his work to awaken in all people. The two pieces below are random examples of his work walking into socio-political arenas without any apology.

"Coyote" New York, 1974, a work encompassing the English invasion of America, and the demotion of the shamanic spirit of the coyote into a "pest".

"Freedom of James Boyle", Scotland, 1975, a work intended to bring awareness to the injustice of Boyle's imprisonment, and the cruelty of imprisonment itself.