

John McDonald

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NEWS



[*Have we had the last laugh on Don Harwin?*](#)

One of the notable casualties of the coronavirus in Sydney has been the NSW for the Arts, Don Harwin. Although Don is still an animate being his political career has been temporarily frozen, as he has been forced to resign for sneaking off to his weekender in Pearl Beach when everyone was supposed to be in lockdown.

It's a little ironic – like Al Capone being done for tax evasion – that a Minister who has presided over the ongoing scandal of ‘relocating’ (ie. destroying) the Powerhouse Museum, has been pinged for breaking a public health and safety order. The

with the scheme.

To recap briefly:

- The move is completely unnecessary
- It will destroy museum visitation
- Parramatta doesn't want it, having originally asked the government for better arts facilities, not a tricked-up science museum
- It will be wildly expensive, with no change from \$1.5 billion, and counting.

The entire process has been shrouded in secrecy, with the Minister leading the way in arrogant disregard of expert opinion and public opposition. The only compelling reason anybody has suggested is that the NSW government is eager to sell the Powerhouse site to its pals, the developers.

With the recovery from the Covid-19 lockdown expected to cost many billions it would be sheer madness to proceed with the Powerhouse project – but the government is still not prepared to face reality, even as another inquiry gets underway.

To be fair to Don Harwin, the Powerhouse is the nasty stain on his record, although regional galleries may argue they could have done better under his reign. His positives were his willingness to participate in multiple arts events, and his strident, consistent support for institutions such as the National Art School and the Sydney Film Festival. As Arts Ministers go, if one could remove the Powerhouse intrigue, Don would score highly. Too many politicians, given the Arts portfolio, treat it as a soft option. They

the government decides to inflict on an already mutilated sector. The current Federal incumbent, Paul Fletcher, is Exhibit A, but it's a syndrome that afflicts both sides of politics.

Don Harwin gave the impression that he had a genuine enthusiasm for the arts, and was responsive to many appeals for support. The Powerhouse debacle showed the other side of his character as a ruthless political operative. It's that side which will most likely bring him back into the fold after he's served his penance. It's a sad reality that politicians are so often rewarded for their sins and penalised for their virtues.

As for the website, this week I'm running a piece called *Tales from the Woods* (with apologies to Odon von Horvath), which was written late last year but through the vicissitudes of magazine publishing never saw the light of day. Happily the Sydney Morning Herald, in its new essay-friendly mode, was ready to give it a run. It looks at Klaus Littmann's *For Forest*, a unique project that led to a forest being planted in a football stadium in Klagenfurt, Austria, and its implications for the perennial dilemma of political art – ie. How does one make a work of art that has any genuine political impact? It would have been ideal to run this essay while the bushfires were raging in Australia but the underlying issues never go away.

The film column looks at a low-key science fiction movie streamable from multiple sources. *Vivarium* is highly accessible, but disappointing in many ways. Some people think I should concentrate only on the 'good' movies and exhibitions, but that would be

politician to focus on the good bits and eliminate the skullduggery.

UPDATE



[TALES FROM THE WOODS](#)

[From Goya's *The Third of May, 1808* \(1814\) to Picasso's *Guernica* \(1937\), to countless, politically correct projects by contemporary artists, the modern era has used art as a megaphone for speaking the truth to power.](#)

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[VIVARIUM](#)

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