

John McDonald <jmcdartcritic+newsletter@substack.com>

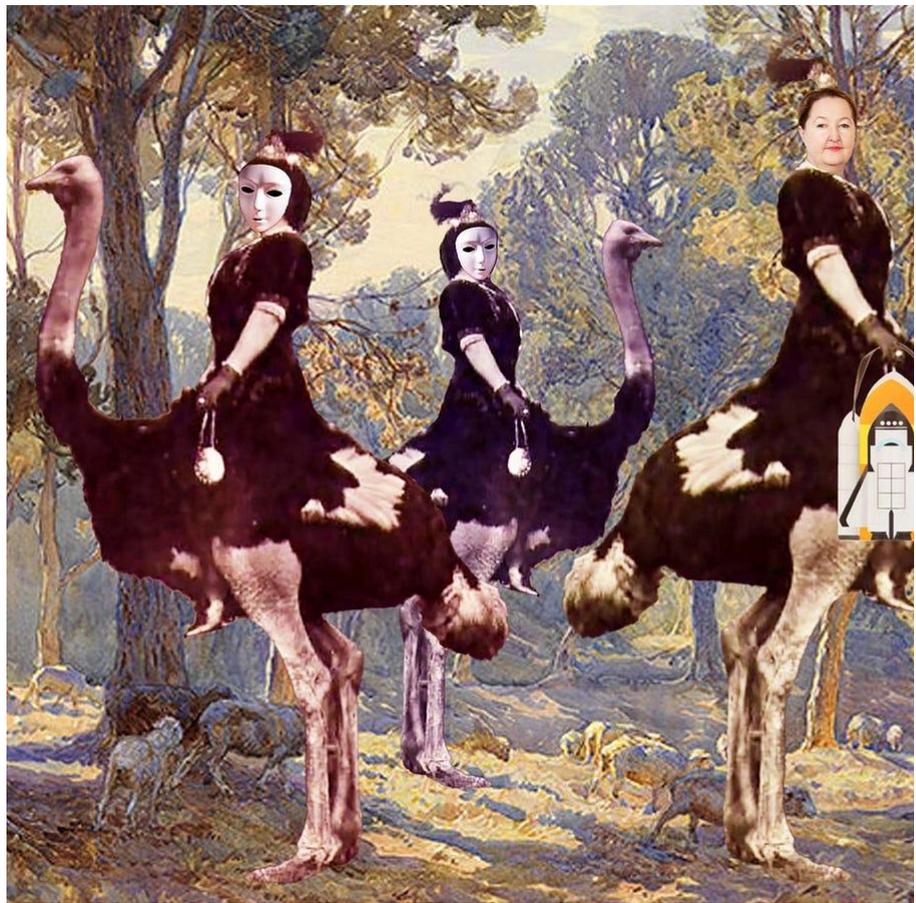
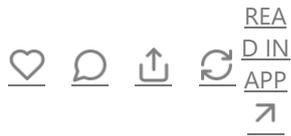
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Ostrich Outlook

611

JOHN MCDONALD

OCT 13



Australian arts leadership in action. Next year, outer space.

Having taken on the role of the artworld's Neighbourhood Watch, it's amazing how many people send me tips-offs, inside information, or alerts about scandals waiting to happen. Much of this material is (legally) unprintable, and almost all my informants wish to remain anonymous. I can understand their concerns, inasmuch as they have paid jobs or need to get on professionally with the people they suspect of heinous

deeds. Regardless of who can and can't be identified, the name of the game is Accountability – and it's an increasingly unfashionable pastime in arts circles.

In a well-run media environment I wouldn't have to play the lone wolf or return to the same subjects so often. The cowardice and complacency of the mainstream media when it comes to matters of art and culture (I won't venture into other areas!), has reached levels I never thought possible. It would be wrong though, to blame all the bad behaviour in the artworld on a lack of coverage – it requires agency from people in positions of power who feel they are invulnerable and free to do whatever they like. I never expect to get a reply from anyone, although I'm quietly confident of being the subject of endless malicious gossip. This is the way it works: never attempt to justify your actions or respond to criticisms, just bribe your allies and defame your detractors.

Anything that appears in this editorial will almost certainly be ignored by my colleagues in the media, were it ever so earth-shattering. Those who are prepared to write such stories frequently find themselves stifled by their editors. The ostrich position, head-in-the-sand, is now the fall-back position for most outlets.

Let me run a few typical items past you:

- Which well-known artist, who recently won a high-profile prize, has exhibited work that bears a remarkable resemblance to work made by an English artist two years earlier? The match is so striking it's not easy to see this as mere coincidence.
- Which guest curator for a major museum exhibition, recently took the opportunity to spruik one of their selections for the show on a press release issued by a commercial gallery? As both the curator and the new artist are represented by this gallery, the line between public and private is not merely blurred, it has been swept away. The museum appointment is being used to attract attention and add value to a commercial arrangement. Some might argue that this particular gallery has already enjoyed such tremendous favour from this particular museum that both parties see no harm in a little cross-promotion. In the finance world I believe this is known as insider trading.
- Which museum professional was the subject of a hefty, independent report on their bullying, but faced no consequences? Said individual has since transferred to another important job at a major institution. No questions asked. Neither is this the only instance of someone leaving a job under a cloud, only to secure another appointment

almost immediately. It seems to be standard procedure nowadays that when someone blots their copy book, they leave with suitable non-disclosure arrangements, allowing them to pick up where they left off with some other, unsuspecting organisation.

- Finally – an easy one – which major museum, or museums, asked collectors to pay for freight and insurance of works to be included in an important overseas exhibition? In all my years in the business I've never heard of such an arrangement, which seems wildly unprofessional, and implies a pay-for-play ethos. Decline to fork out and have your work omitted from the show? It's a logical assumption.

I could go on and on with these teasers. Each one is worthy of a story in the mainstream press – but nothing is ever done. When it's "only" the arts, nobody could care less. Where there's no criticism and no investigative journalism, such anomalies flourish, until little grey areas become deep, dark pits of corruption. Professional standards and conventions are ignored with the same facility that Donald Trump has shown in his ability to overhaul all accepted standards in US politics. It's not that we live in an increasingly lawless world – the laws are still in place, but ignored, or used to intimidate truth-tellers. In the artworld it's virtually a rule that those who talk most volubly about "ethics" are the most ethically challenged of all.

One would think that arts bureaucracies funded by the taxpayer would be utterly transparent in all their activities. But as these editorials have shown, such bodies have become more secretive than ASIO. The NSW government now declines to tell us where it is distributing its largesse, citing previously unheard-of "[privacy](#)" concerns. In NSW, the role of Arts Advisor, could be more accurately defined as "Legal Advisor", instructing the Minister on how to 'get away it' when he chooses to defund many of the leading arts institutions in the state in order to give more money to his pet monster, the Powerhouse. This is where the sudden concern for "privacy" comes in.

As for [Creative Australia](#), still licking its wounds from the Khaled Sabsabi on-off-on again, debacle, it seems that any questions about the way decisions are made and funds dispersed draw a standard answer about "robust processes" being in place. Yeah, sure... None of the issues raised in [The Australian](#) have been properly examined, and no-one has been held accountable, with the possible exception of former Chair, Robert Morgan, who chose to get out while there was still a lifeboat available.

As ever, the gold standard of frightful information is the Powerhouse. Some of it arrives courtesy of insiders and former employees, but the most bizarre stuff comes via press release from head office. For instance, we've just had the announcement that the grand opening of the billion-dollar Powerhouse Parramatta (tentatively set for September next year) will feature a show called [Task Eternal](#) as its major exhibition. The press release explains:

Developed over four years, Task Eternal is an expansive and immersive exhibition tracing humanity's enduring quest to defy gravity, take flight and journey into space – from First Nations sky knowledges and early aviation to cutting-edge aerospace innovation, ethics and speculative futures.

There's that word, "ethics"! In brief, it's a show about space, but with added Aboriginality, a bit of second-hand James Turrell, and anything else that can be tossed into the kind of cultural hotpot favoured by Great Helmsperson, Lisa Havilah.

Further details were revealed in a [Sydney Morning Herald](#) article by arts sleuth, Linda Morris, who tells us:

The show marks a sharp shift in approach away from exhibitions anchored in object display and explanatory text to one that chief executive Lisa Havilah says stresses diversity, inclusion and a plurality of voices from astronauts, artists and engineers to First Nations' elders, to scientists and speculative writers... It will also be the most expensive of the opening exhibitions at the new \$915 million Powerhouse headquarters. Sources inside the museum say it will cost at least \$18 million.

Lots of diversity, inclusion and plurality, as expected, and for a meagre outlay of only \$18 million. That's more than four times the annual funds the NSW government provides for the Museum of Contemporary Art. Even positive-thinking Linda couldn't help noticing that this is being trumpeted at the same time the Art Gallery of NSW, is having \$7.2 million slashed from its annual stipend, forcing it to make drastic staff cuts.

The display will be based on a science fiction novel, [Tower of Babylon](#), by Ted Chiang, continuing the Powerhouse's preference for fiction over heritage, and literature over material culture. The material aspect is quite significant however, in that it will see a six-storey structure built inside the museum using 60 tonnes of steel. This fabulous apparition will remain in place for two years, using a changing collection of items from

the Powerhouse collection as if they were baubles on a Christmas tree. Remember, there'll be none of this nonsense about "explanatory texts", it'll be pure spectacle, fun and games for all the family.

OK, that's enough breathless excitement. Much as I hesitate to strike a sour note, I wonder if a significant majority of readers might consider it an obscenity to be shelling out \$18 million on a two-year display at a time when every other institution is being cut back to the bone. My bold prediction is that the display will get big attendances for the first few weeks, maybe for a few months, then the flood of visitors (no flood plain jokes intended), will slow to a trickle. Two years down the track, Powerhouse will be looking at the biggest operating deficit every registered in the state of NSW.

This is obviously what NSW Minister for Arts and Hooplas, John Graham, has in mind, because he has carefully shepherded this project through the treacherous headlands of public and expert opinion, showing no interest in a realistic assessment of costs, or what the public might actually want.

Mr. Graham has such implicit trust in his visionary Helmsperson that he has allowed her to say pretty much anything she likes to Budget Estimates and have as much money as she needs to feed her megalomaniac fantasies. In fact, I'm beginning to wonder if the Minister and his Director are not part of some clandestine anarchist conspiracy that plans to bring the government to its knees by bankrupting the state of NSW with a single museum project whose extravagance would have made Nero blush.

So much for the macro and the mega. No less revealing are the micro details of the Powerhouse project – a saga of palace intrigue straight out of Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*, only this time, there's only one supreme ruler. Allegedly, there is an inner circle of favoured retainers, and a large host of workers completely confused about their job descriptions. If a member of the inner circle actually disagrees with the Leader they are likely to find themselves banished to the ranks of the hoi-polloi. This helps discourage fraternisation, ensuring a strictly hierarchical management structure.

It's no surprise that staff are confused, because most of the people hired for top positions at generous salaries have no museum experience whatsoever, all hailing from different parts of the corporate world. That dwindling band of curators who know about the collection and about museums, are treated as sherpas expected to act as guides,

to fetch and carry for the assorted band of neophytes, “associates”, and celebrities who are invited to “do shows”. These shows, such as the current Castle Hill display chosen by influencer, [Chloe Hayden](#), and the next one, curated by Andy Griffiths, author of that scholarly tome, *The Day My Bum Went Psycho* (2001), dispense with all the dreary museum paraphernalia in favour of social-media style ‘likes’.

I’m reliably informed that the two most common remarks among the Powerhouse’s newly employed are: “I’m not actually sure what my role is,” and “The job is nothing like I expected”.

Among staff there is a growing suspicion that the Leader just makes it up as she goes along, firing off thought bubbles in all directions. What we need is a competition for stories about the Parramatta River! Find me more Indigenous people to send to residencies at the Cité des Arts! I don’t care if they live in Central Australia! Sign up Kylie for another tour of Indian restaurants in the western suburbs! Let’s get people to share their gripping anecdotes about shopping malls! How are we going with the First Nations Right of Reply Photography Commission? Another Blak rave party! Another Games festival! More dormitories! More market gardens! More kitchens! Bring on the dancing chicken! There’s no end of good ideas, none of them bearing any resemblance to what we might expect from a museum.

There is considerable comment about the quality and quantity of objects acquired from favoured people under the Cultural Gifts scheme. Or works of contemporary art purchased from favourite dealers. I’m not about to provide an inventory. Much as I like [Vincent Namatjira](#), I can’t quite understand why I’m paying for him to spend three months in Paris.

I won’t start on the Associates program, which has seen millions channelled into the pockets of favoured individuals for reasons that remain fuzzy.

After every novelty item has been exhausted in a furious attempt to spend all the money gifted to the Powerhouse by John Graham, we get down to the Orwellian assault on language itself. What was previously known as the museum’s Education department is now called The Academy. Instead of applying for a job as an Education Officer you can apply to be an [Academy Program Producer](#)! No wonder the poor buggers are confused. It’s a grand title bestowed by someone who began by gutting the original Education

department, overseeing a drastic reduction in the number of school visits. Some may remember Havilah's famous [Adelaide speech](#) of 2021 – now strangely removed from the Internet – where she discussed her leadership secrets: “I didn't ask the audience what they want. I ignored the data...”, “In every instance – *even when I wasn't going to* – I always asked: ‘How can I help?’” (my italics)

She recommended “...never explaining or trying to educate.” Under her expert stewardship, as former curator, [Kylie Winkworth](#) has noted, the museum experienced a 90% decline in self-generated revenue over the first five years, while education participation declined by more than 50%. These glowing results have been richly rewarded by Mr. Graham, who obviously subscribes to the theory that when you've run up a big gambling debt, the best way to fix it is to make bigger bets.

We are now into Year Seven of the Havilah Empire, its continuing grandeur being propped up by its absorption of all the government funding previously divided among dozens of other museums, galleries and arts organisations. With a new \$18 million display on the drawing board, there's no suggestion that this voracious gluttony is ever going to diminish. If \$18 million is the projected cost, it's almost guaranteed to go over budget.

While it's well known that NSW Treasurer, Daniel Mookhey, has no interest whatsoever in the arts, does he have an interest in watching vast quantities of government money being vaporised as soon as it gets within reach of the Powerhouse? Will Mr. Mookhey be proud to put his name to this financial apocalypse when it finally detonates? Or when Powerhouse Parramatta, with its sixty extra tonnes of steel sinks into the soggy banks of the Parramatta River? Now there's a prize-winning science fiction river story just waiting to be written.

This week's art column travels to Nagoya, for the 2025 [Aichi Triennale: A Time Between Ashes and Roses](#), curated by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi – who's also in charge of next year's Sydney Biennale. Hoor has no shortage of fans and detractors, more for her outspoken support of Palestine than her taste in art. These issues are not going to go away, but to be brutally honest: she made a good job of the show in Japan.

The film being reviewed is Bruce Beresford's low-key family drama, [The Travellers](#), which has little to offer apart from a willing performance by Bryan Brown as a cranky old bastard. I'm rapidly getting to the stage where I can identify.

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