

Parergon

The global language of art, referred to as “International Art Language”, a quite different species from the vernacular, often written by the artist, more so the gallerist, the publicist, the curator and the critic, has advanced in recent years a plethora of claims to art’s importance and consequence, saving us, its global audience, from ourselves (“the Anthropocene”), presented as a remedy, solution, corrective: a cure all (“a vehicle for change”), proposing to liberate us from our apathy and/or ignorance, neutrality and/or complicity in the world’s travails; as redress and atonement. (As a perversely laughable hypothesis, art was even touted in one art commentary online platform lead article during the run-up to the recent Australian May election, being able to “contribute to our democracy.”) All this, through a concatenation of buzzwords and jargon with its tendency to aggrandize art’s substance and meaning, by way of the “agency” and “solidarity” of its proponents: the artist, the publicist, the curator, the art critic, *et al...*

The English language, lingua franca of the international art world – yet to be “decolonized” – has become increasingly distorted over recent decades, more so in recent years, to the near point that it has lost its (real) meaning. In the context of the roller-coaster of contemporary Western politics, both the constitutional kind and that of hyperallergic civil-rights scholars and activist-engineered hashtag social movements, Art Language has become in its architecture and presentation, amongst other qualities hyperbolic, contentious, deceptive. Buzzwords and doublespeak proliferate, meaning and veracity contorted, corrupt or opaque, slightly disingenuous at one end of its spectrum, fraudulent at the other. Nouns have become verbs, adjectives nouns, phrases double-adverbial, prefixes hyper-augment, words “weaponized”, “harnessing” a “space” of “solidarity” for the writer’s and artist’s “labour” and “knowledge production”, “mapping” the “trajectories” of “identity” and “navigating” their “stories” of “the responsibility and ability of art in forging a sense of collectivity”, “resisting the hegemony of Euro-American ideologies”, and so on. It has been, and is used to speak to itself, of itself, of what is often neither inherent in the art nor the artist, a unique language inaccessible to a global audience, advantageous only to its advocates, but neither to validity nor principle...

In their seminal study of ‘International Art Language’, Alex Rule and David Levine attested, “This language has everything to do with English, but it is emphatically not English... what really matters for this language – what ultimately makes it a language – is the pointed distance from English that it has always cultivated.” Audiences are now assailed, ad nauseum, by this new “coloniality of knowledge”, “ubiquitous in our post-truth, pre-fascist world” as “a frame to interrogate our contemporary warped space”: ergo, “the virus of coloniality” and “the Colonial Matrix of Power”, “the narcissism of colonial control”, “the recursive regeneration of the colonial episteme”, “algorithmic racism... and the new colonial frontiers of surveillance capitalism”, “labouring in the age of augmented realities”, “interrogate the historical contingencies”, “the interdependence of the pragmatic gesture”, “poetic imagination in ideations of... solidarity”, “decolonial feminist mapping”, “think conceptually through the space of photography”, “decolonial disobedient conservatism”,

“make evident the invisible narratives”, “dewesternization and rewesternization”, “deploying logics of solidarity to interrogate their own terms”, “colonial toxification”, “intimacies of colonial domination”, “refusing a total disavowal of the agency inherent in dreaming”, “anti-colonial and anti-racist projects of world-making”, “the extractive technologies of colonial vision”, “mobilizing power of art, craft and fandom culture as antidotes to racism and socio-cultural trauma”, “the machine’s role as... a medium for today’s racial capitalism”, “techno-fossils that remain in the aftermath of colonial violence”, “the neocolonial will to occupy the future”, “a catchphrase decolonized... to think about our relationship with the white gaze”, “decolonize the myths and perceptions [that] reveal these touristic images of paradise as a cliché”, “the global realities of late-capitalist, settler-colonial, white supremacist patriarchy”, “valences index disingenuous forms of influence made durable”, “parasitic platform capitalism”. On and on it goes...

Art Language, is not alone of course. The long-term dissembling verbiage of real estate is one of the most dubious platforms for veracity and integrity. A property in a “much sought after”, “tightly held” area means that there usually aren’t any properties for sale because the collective owners aren’t interested in selling; a “nestled” property means that it is surrounded and confined by multiple, higher buildings; a “verdant setting” reveals several trees and/or bushes on its boundaries; a “cameo view of Sydney Harbour” equates to a pencil thin blue-green vertical stripe between two opposite view-obscuring buildings; a property providing “effortless living” really means it’s very expensive and the buyer must be a multi-millionaire to buy it, while the reverse, “exciting scope for improvement” confirms that the property has some major structural problems requiring extensive, costly repairs. A recent addition to this lexicon is that new apartment developments are “curated”, of its design finishes and fittings. Finance and Big Business are equal felons. *The Australian Financial Review*, at the end of 2021, published a list of the year’s worst jargon examples in finance, being: “transformative”, “hybridized ideation”, “decomplexify”, “romance the idea/s”, “disbenefits”, “systematic cadence”, “@ scale approach”, “developer velocity”, “platformication”, and more...

In addition to artist statements, publicists animate or heighten content seeking to strategically pre-empt viewer appreciation and understanding, curators and critics, emerging and otherwise inflate, exaggerate tenuous if not unsupported qualities for a professional edge, the artist’s if not theirs. Art Language has become a badge-of-authority, a brand of de rigueur correctness, a *fuax*-power. Unquestionably, the most omnipresent art buzzword for its trite, fanciful assertion is that an artist “interrogates” something through their art (according to Rule & Levine, it also “questions, encodes, transforms, subverts, imbricates, displaces” without doing so). The meaning of the word, as it used to be known, is to “ask questions of (a person), to seek answers or information that the person questioned considers *personal or secret*” (emphasis mine). As we know, a number of notorious twentieth century police and intelligence agencies “interrogated”. Art may well have the substance to provoke a studious response in the viewer beyond an aesthetic appreciation, but it is unlikely to either “interrogate” anything nor impress upon that viewer a corresponding distortion, that art might “ask questions” because the artist, publicist and/or curator say so. In contrast, in a world far removed, the English cricketer, swing and seam bowler James Anderson, in his favourite atmospheric playing conditions, curving in the air a 160 gram leather, twine and cork ball at 135kph at a batsman who has a subsequent reaction time of 0.46 seconds to not get bodily hit or be dismissed out, certainly “asks questions” of said batsman’s batting technique, until he is either dismissed out or knocked out. A similar distortion is that an artist “unpacks” something through their art. My first job having left school was as an assistant storeman, when I unpacked boxes for four years...

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The motive for this attention to current art writing was a moment towards the end of 2021, of two instances observed simultaneously, of two dissimilar texts emanating from the same city, though appearing in two different countries. Invoking the tenor of and paraphrasing the introductory device (of truth v. plausibility) to the Coen Brothers' 1996 film, *Fargo*: "The following is a true story, the events depicted here took place towards the end of 2021. Out of respect for the 'guilty' the names have been deleted."

The first instance involved a national newspaper arts critic (and academic, with an extensive knowledge of art history and the classics, known for his "vast erudition with sometimes bracing assessments of exhibitions, galleries and artworks"), who in an end-of-year arts roundup, that is, for the general public, stated that in one particular national art museum its galleries appeared to have a disproportionate representation of Aboriginal art at this one particular point in time, of the Christmas/New Year holiday period, relative to all other art disciplines and art historical periods in its collections. While acknowledging Aboriginal art and culture should be of interest to all, the writer opined that, in it being foreign to the cultural traditions of the vast majority of the population and the histories that have formed the contemporary world, it could be expected of the museum to mount a "variety" of exhibitions drawn from its extensive collections, thus reflecting its impressive cultural and historical "diversity" — and that the program looked "ideological". *Veni, vidi*.

The printed word, of ink on paper, has long been subject to the editor's blue pencil and libel laws, whereas the new conventions of social media tend to dwell in the lesser etiquettes of vituperation (to quote one scribe, of "Twitter's lead down a sewer of abuse"). One social media response to this review, by an artist of current contemporary note, who presumably wasn't present to sight the evidence, crudely dismissed and queried the writer's "entitled, white, right" (perhaps, therefore) journalism. As a retort to this objection, not necessarily facetious, is what does "entitled, white" Left writing look like? Invective of this kind, expected on social media, is consistent with multiple sectors of contemporary global art and political discourse that eschew dialogue for diatribe, driven by non-acceptance of an opinion and/or perception opposite to or other than one's own. The tenor of the art critic's use of language was in response to what was observed and examined on the museum walls and floors, contrasting that of the social media interlocutor *in absentia*. While the latter is also equally "entitled" to a point of view about something experienced, the corollary here is the now uncertain consideration of what is utterable, and permissible, who determines this and how it is presented within the increasingly fractious black-white binary of Australian cultural and political commentary...

The second instance, by another Australian writer in a peer-reviewed Southeast Asian art journal, was a review of the exhibition *The National 2021 New Australian Art* which, in its aggregation of inclination and hyperbolic art jargon, presented more so the author's apparent self-loathing as citizen of a nation with its "white colonial" history, than anything else, contentious though the exhibition was (see this journal Issue 10, <https://artdesign.unsw.edu.au/unsw-galleries/divan-issue-10>). This writer, of course, again is "entitled" to advocate an individual viewpoint, but the peer-review panel, like any fair-minded reader, might query that in such a scholarly-rendered publication the author of an overtly partisan text might be "interrogated" for verification of facts, in its fashionably narrow, sectarian assertions. While the text's driving theme — "challenges the role of Eurocentric narratives" and similar, undoubtedly merit scholarly scrutiny, its formula of the now ubiquitous Art Language rant, as badge-of-contrariness, denied both its integrity and validity...

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Ergo: “global legacies of imperialism”, “critique of the power structures” and “decolonize the museum.” OK, nothing not read before; mild stuff, *du jour*. But the plaintiff citations intensified with “the violence of colonialism in the past and its continuation in the present”, “strategies of deconstruction to voice resistance to the exploitation of ‘otherized’ people and lands”, “systemically oppressed and controlled by European colonists”, “art as an agent of decolonial change”, “visceral memorial to the three billion *non-human beings* that died from the bushfires, a disaster traceable to the colonial mismanagement of Indigenous lands” (emphasis mine), “provocatively destabilize the ideology of nationhood” and “dismantle the colonial imaginary of the ‘nation’”, incantations neither proven nor referenced; while “confront the destructiveness of Australia’s colonial structures and imagine alternative frameworks of *care in place*” (emphasis mine) trailed into art jargon inanity; as referred to prior, the presumptuous cure-all, “art as a vehicle for change” and finally, that pervasive banality, that this art “interrogates”. In toto, the writer failed to qualify or reference how...

This tale of two texts, of their disparities in articulation, meaning and equity, is symptomatic of contemporary global trends. An inclination towards appropriated Art Language and principle is hardly surprising given this country’s half a century or more mimicry of Euro-American socio-cultural movements. Circa three decades ago, following such influence, the greater national arts landscape, of all disciplines and compositions, for political and economic validation was branded the “Creative Industries” and/or “Cultural Industries”, thereby linking “creativity” with commercial markets, so that business and government might discern it from primary and manufacturing industries, according to one think tank report, “turning the latent symbolic value residing in highly educated workforces, communities and locales into economic assets”, all of which would confirm the nation’s “creative economy”. As a recent flow on from this, artists (and others, who therefore were not, or are not, artists) are now, by those same imperatives, labelled “creatives”. It might be presumed that the terminology “artist” has become elitist, too defining of something specific, intellectually or practically skilled perhaps, for the advancing equalitarianism of policymakers. Or, it might suggest perhaps that “artists” aren’t “creative”. Such desired equalizing nomenclature, that all “creatives” are now equally creative with “artists” (or vice versa) is a paradox that also needs to be “interrogated”, as being creative mightn’t necessarily mean that one is an artist...

My mother’s mother (born 1896), who with her matrilineally-refined ‘secret’ recipe made prized old-world Christmas puddings—the type prepared over several weeks, hung in a pudding cloth from the house veranda to dry, or perhaps to ferment, along with baking and preserving, the kind of which (“knowledge production”, “labour” etc.) have long been usurped by lifeless mass production—was certainly creative. Was she an artist then? Extending this consideration, one might regard another universe of ingenuity and talent, of over a century of national Country Women’s Association members who presented their cooking, baking and preserving efforts in national annual Royal Show competitions, certainly unappreciated over time by the “arts industry”. Perhaps they were all artists as well, and not just simply creative...

Some final words, from someone who has been writing them eruditely for nearly half a century as educator, historian, critic and curator, about art:

Writers illuminate entry points of art and artists into the pale of history. Written texts are just as important as works of art in representing significance, value and meaning in the world of art.

T. K. Sabapathy, 2009