

Undoing 'the folded lie': media, art and ethics

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In his poem 'September 1 1939', WH Auden writes 'All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie/...the lie of Authority' (Auden 203: 125-8). The poem is perhaps not his best, being loaded with adjectives and bordering on sentiment, but at its core is a howl against 'The windiest militant trash/Important Persons shout,' and the numbing of selves under the weight of everyday politics and geopolitics and economic politics and all the mess that constitutes contemporary life. New Zealand artist Lorraine Webb suggests, in a personal communication I had with her, that 'Today, Auden's "folded lie" is more like the moving half truth, the screen lie, and all we want is artists who use their work to talk about the lie of war; not to create a new propaganda, but to unearth the complexities of our common humanity.'

In this paper I want to address the issue towards which she gestures: the relationship between art and the mass media, and the ethical dimensions available to artists. This is an old story, of course, one that has been debated at least since Plato's time, but in the current context, where the mass media is effectively the new agora, and where artists are increasingly feeling embattled, it is worth revisiting. For twentieth-century art theorists, the conversation between sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and artist Hans Haacke, recorded in their book *Free Exchange* (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995), pretty much sums up what is at stake for artists in this context. Art has an 'obligation,' according to dominant discourses in the field, to focus on the aesthetic and to present the individual artist's perspective; it is the work of art to communicate artistic values and eschew any other necessity; this demands 'a renunciation of certain functions, particularly political functions.' Such discourses generally insist that art is politically and socially neutral, and economically disinterested; though a glance at arts practice across history would tend to disabuse anyone of this notion. Like it or not, artists are involved in the social, political and economic spheres because art is a mechanism for representing and constituting social relations and social values. As Haacke points out, art is a form of symbolic power which 'can be put to the service of domination or emancipation' (1995: 2), and whether artists consciously identify themselves with either side of this divide, they and their work are available to be read, framed and co-opted by interests beyond the field of cultural production. And although conservative governments tend to treat artists as the enemy, part of the 'chattering classes,' artists work, and are put to work, on both sides: both in radical protest and as supporters of the hegemony.

In the recent past, however, art and artists have emerged more often as voices of resistance than as cheerleaders for the increasingly right wing polity. The numbers of US film actors involved in protests against the government of George W Bush; the numbers of Australian artists actively engaging in what can be termed 'human rights' art; the assaults made by governments in both those nations against the arts; all these signal that both sides are tooling up for the battle, though the obvious advantage rests with governments, and they are making use of their power. The US government, for instance, has for decades used financial weapons to control art, especially through the support provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, and this continues under the presidency of George W Bush, who is a supporter of American Western (Texan) art, but places limits on what counts as worthwhile. According to his deputy press campaign secretary, Ray Sullivan, 'He's made it clear that we should not spend public money to support obscene material or to denigrate religion' (Artnews 2000). In Australia the quarrel about what should and should not be offered to the arts, and what place art plays in society, continues to rumble. Most recently (November 2004) the

official arts funding body, the Australia Council for the Arts, announced plans to dissolve two of its nine arts practice boards – the Community Cultural Development and New Media Arts boards. This, OzCo insisted, was done in the interests of efficiency; but angry artists point out that each of these boards, especially the former, has actively challenged the Federal government's moves to restructure the social formations of Australia. The Federal government too has been sidelining the arts generally; first by collapsing the ministry into the uber-ministry of the Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts (where it was clearly a very junior partner), and then in 2001 by banishing it from that central portfolio to the new outer ministry portfolio of the Arts and Sport. In the view of many commentators this is a direct assault on the meaning-making potentialities of art, and a reduction of the field to one of entertainment – indeed, the minister of this portfolio, Rod Kemp, was described by the *Melbourne Age* as the 'minister for fun' (Hudson 2001: 24). Not that there's anything wrong with fun. Not that art can't be fun. But art is, particularly at historical moments when many social values are under assault, a site in which questions of ethics and ontology and identity can be played out, and its function as this site is being denied by voices of authority. Artists in this context of course have the option to continue to follow their own aesthetic, or to make beautiful works that suit the furniture in your living room. Alternatively they can take up the challenge presented by governments that seem to be committed to silencing any interrogative or ideologically engaged art, and claim a space in which to be seen and heard. And a choice is necessarily made, consciously or not; as Haacke points out, 'in the practical world, the evacuation of the political is tantamount to inviting whoever wants to occupy the vacuum that's left behind' (1995: 39).

Many artists are taking up this challenge and making a conscious choice to engage with the political environment, and I will discuss the work of two such artists, Lorraine Webb and Chaco Kato. Webb is a painter based in Wanganui, who generally exhibits in the North Island, though her works are also shown in Australia and in the South Island. Kato is a sculptor and installation artist, Australia-based over the past few years but who has connections with New Zealand: in 2000, she undertook a residency supported by Asia 2000 Foundation NZ, and based at the Quay School of Arts in Wanganui. Principally I will discuss works from two exhibitions: Chaco's *Grief Transformed*, which was a product of her residency, and shown at the Quay School's gallery; and Lorraine's *Face Value*, shown at Te Manawa Gallery in Palmerston North in 2003.

At the heart of my, and many other creative practitioners', thesis is the notion that art has its responsibilities. This was expressed famously by the Irish poet WB Yeats in his line 'In dreams begin responsibilities;' a line reprised by many other artists, including the American prose writer, Delmore Schwartz, who wrote a short story by that title; and the Irish band U2, who cite it in their song 'Acrobat'. It points to the popular notion that creative practice comes out of the dream-life of the artist, or the extra-rational engagement with the world: the subconscious, in a Freudian sense, or the collective unconscious, in a Jungian sense. It is also a reminder that creative practice has, across time and cultures, been considered to bear responsibility to society, to governments, or to god. Artists have frequently accepted that responsibility and engaged with society, governments or god, sometimes as the cheerleader, sometimes as the critic or the Fool who brings to public attention the things that are going wrong. In this category we could consider neoclassical poetry and its biting critiques of social problems; nineteenth-century social realists (Blandford Fletcher's exposure of the treatment of London's poor, Rudyard Kipling's critique of US and

UK imperialism); the Dadaists' refusal to accept 'order;' or the rap artists of the 1990s and Hip Hop musicians of the 2000s who savagely highlight what it means to be young and black in US cities.

Of course the notion that it is primarily artists who reflect on and make representations about society is too limiting; engagement with, critique of and reflections on society, and the translation of such reflections into representations, is very much a human act. People in general observe what's going on around them, talk about it to each other, take photographs, collect memorabilia and display them in their own little *wunderkammer*; in short, they put on record their own and others' stories. This is both a valid and a necessary act: 'art' (or making representations) in this broadest sense, as well as in the more commonly accepted sense of 'art,' is about keeping the soul alive: it involves our being human, telling stories, and crafting, critiquing and maintaining society. It demands responsibility in the selection of stories to be told, and in the selection of perspectives from which to do the telling.

Art in its more particular sense – the practice committed to aesthetics – differs from these general ways of representing because it is, famously, for art's sake alone: free from necessity or social obligation, free too from the constraints of story or the demands of critique. It is in the truest sense a floating signifier and a floating practice: available for different purposes, by different people, in different social, historical and cultural contexts. In this perspective art is never either innocent, implicated, or concerned – it's simply a human practice, or artifact, that takes its place variously in the social domain, and is put to work today for pure celebration of life, tomorrow to lead Fritz Lang's robot workers through their paces. But despite its discourses of autonomy, art is never free or independent; it is always enmeshed with other social discourses and obligations. Nor is it particularly effective in being put to work, by many accounts; there is some question about the capacity of art in the contemporary world to communicate to the general public in any real way. Indeed, the primary channel for knowledge about, and connection to, society or government is neither art nor the record-keeping of ordinary people in their everyday lives, but the mass media. This public sphere, or agora, that is the face of our network of newspapers, radios, television channels and internet sites, is what brings to social attention whatever is deemed noteworthy by the media's gatekeepers; and thus formulates our ideas of what's going on in the world. Arguably its influence is so overwhelming that it may even be taking over the dream-world of artists, becoming the primary resource for their ideas and their works, annexing the imagination under the greater authority of mediated information. Writers such as Guy Debord, Jonathon Crary, Armand Mattelart and Manuel Castells all point out the efficacy of mass media in this respect. We live, after all, in a world that is at least postmodern, if not post-postmodern, and one of the central features of such organisation is the privileging of what Manual Castells (1997) calls informationalism: the pre-eminence of knowledge, information and communication. Informationalism, Castells argued, associated as it is with the new communication technologies, has had a pervasive impact on the way we understand the world, and has transformed all the main spheres of human activity. Artists, even in their most alienated, autonomous identities, cannot be free of its effects, any more than even the most autonomous art can be entirely disconnected from its context. And it can be difficult for art to achieve a voice, in the communication marketplace, because the logics of the two fields are hardly commensurable. Although, as the artist Leon Golub said, 'Artists are part of the information process' (Golub and Siegel 1988: 61), little of what is done in a work of art can be said to have an immediate instrumental or communicative utility; it is likely

committed to an aesthetic and its own technical vocabulary, rather than concerned with information, knowledge or practical communication. Art's divergence from the mass media is also evident in the attitudes held to being human; art is very clearly about specific human concerns, as the artists pointed out:

I paint subjects in an attempt to understand their motivations, feelings or their states of mind. The act of painting makes me aware of my tacit complicity in their actions, their lives or deaths – I am both viewer of and participant in the human race (Lorraine Webb).

My worldview is the idea that everything constantly changes. This leads on to an idea of 'interconnectedness': everything relates to everything else in a complex web The altering movement of this extremely intricate entity constructs our society. And this movement is often invisible unless we take pains to try to sense or view it (Chaco Kato).

But what happens in the media is, very often, the evacuation of the social and the human. This is, we might argue, central to capitalist organisation of society. Just as many doctors see their patients as IPBUs (Income Producing Biological Units), so too under capitalism exchange – by which I mean making more than we spend, getting more than we give – is predicated on a kind of violence, the elision of the common humanity of the person with whom we are exchanging. Brian Massumi picks up on this notion when he refers to media affect as 'fear-blur,' and points out that as the public-sphere face of the capitalist machine, the mass media makes visible to us 'the direct *collective* perception of the contemporary condition of the possibility of being human: the capitalized accident-form' (Massumi 1992) – or, we might add, the IPBU-ism of us all. This can be a little depressing for creative practitioners, because our work as recorders and interpreters of our time, and our identity as people committed to making representations, is vitiated by the pre-eminence of informational values, and the media through which they are promulgated. What we experience, in other words, is the theft of the commons that is our imagination, our stories, our perceptions and perspectives.

But the energy is not all one-way: artists are not necessarily silenced by the media public-sphere; art still has something of a voice, which can be used to challenge the 'folded lie.' We saw an instance of this in the recent Case of the Disappearing Tapestry. It may be that, as Sartre suggested, *Guernica* never 'won a single supporter for the Spanish cause' (Adorno 1977: 189), yet in early 2003 the tapestry based on Picasso's painting stood as a witness that discomfited and perhaps confounded one of the more powerful people in the world; and if it didn't win supporters for the peace movement, it surely gave us comfort, and some amusement.

The story is well known: on 5 February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the Security Council of the United Nations to argue for the necessity of military intervention in Iraq, and on that day the tapestry, which hangs outside the Security Council chamber at UN headquarters in New York, was completely draped with a blue cloth and with flags representing the member nations. UN spokespeople insisted that its 'disappearance' had nothing to do with Powell or his presentation; nothing to do with what it might mean to juxtapose his speech in favour of war with Picasso's anti-war images. It was covered up, they argued, purely to provide a better backdrop for the television cameras. Nonetheless, the spectacle of the representative of the most powerful nation on earth urging fellow delegates to assault one of the littler nations, while framed by Picasso's shrieking horse and dying child, would surely have given pause to even the least imaginative of press secretaries. The covering up of this work, whether it was requested by US officials or was done simply

‘for TV aesthetics,’ is a manifest instance of the power of art to act as a corrective, or at least to remind us of human responsibilities: akin to turning face-down the photo of your husband while you’re in bed with your lover.

But to what extent is the work, or rather the imagination, of artists delimited by the mass media? I asked Webb and Kato to what extent they think their ideas come out of media stories. Webb replied:

My ideas for work are often influenced by media stories, ... but then I can’t recall an idea for work ever arriving full-blown. I think that, because I work all the time, my work is bound to be influenced by these things. And perhaps as I get older it becomes more difficult to disentangle where an idea arrived from, because I’m making more and more work over time.

I don’t think actually that a specific event becomes a focus – more that as time goes by, certain issues in the world gradually build up, and then one event may be the thing that becomes attached to my work. To use Kosovo as an example; the work started because I was exploring drawing onto plaster, which I wanted to use as a support because it was so smooth and white. I started drawing my hands because they were there, and because I’ve always had the body as one of my major foci for work. When I’d finished a few drawings I thought how much they looked like artefacts about death, and then I remembered that I’d been reading about the artefacts found in mass graves. So I made some more drawing of parts of the body – like hands and feet, which are so undeniably human. And after that I made a series of large drawings about the graves – actually, about genocide.

Her relationship to media stories is one that effects more what she calls ‘a natural progression’ than a direct intrusion or a colonising of her imagination. Kato indicates a similar relationship with the media, in her reply to the same question:

It is not straightforward. I hear all kind of stories every day through the media, friends and family. Those things slowly sink into my mind and body, then spin and form stories and images. Certainly the media really affects my thoughts a great deal, especially if it is something close to my situation being a migrant and part of a minority in Anglo society. But it doesn’t come straight into my work. (Except sometimes, like in the work ‘Mother and Father and My Words’ which was in the *Migration* show). The [media] situation challenges me in how I understand and how I face it at a much deeper level. And it drives me to ask how I want the situation in the future and why it is a problem, rather than being articulated directly through my work. For example, my work deals with the idea that everything is moving and transforming and re-cycling; that is also my interpretation of the current situation of ‘human traffic’ or ‘migration’ as well as my own everyday experience. It is also part of my Buddhist beliefs, and it resonates with the idea of ecology.

These responses might have been anticipated by anyone versed in poststructural thinking; but they also point to the ongoing concerns of at least these two artists with the ‘work’ of art in the current era. What can art do, and what should it be expected to do? Theodore Adorno’s famous (and routinely misquoted) line, that ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Adorno 1981: 34) is regularly cited in discussions about this question. In the face of the barbarism of the twentieth century, Adorno seems to be saying – is often taken to be saying – it’s too late for aesthetics, and there is no value in art for art’s sake. Inevitably, people have responded passionately to this. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, asks why we should see the Holocaust as more tragic, and finally more meaningful, than all the other acts of violence throughout history (LaCapra 2000). Certainly the Holocaust raises a very serious question of how one can believe that every event ultimately serves some divine purpose, but the

problem of evil, and the critique of a teleology, are hardly new. Still, to give Adorno his due, it does seem both reasonable and human that he should have had this overwhelming, totalising reaction in the wake of an overwhelming, totalising force which had used aesthetics among its tools. The music, the choreographed street theatre, the uniforms of Nazi Germany: all were about what Adorno termed ‘absolute sensation’ (Adorno 1974: 237), if not beauty, and tinged always by the horror that is the Sublime.

Moreover, it’s not really art *per se* that Adorno is attacking here: in *Aesthetics and Politics* he clarifies the point he’d made earlier in *Prisms*, and distinguishes between what he sees as tough, radical, committed – worthwhile! – art, and work that constitutes merely ‘helpless poems to the victims of our time’ (Adorno 1977: 189). Adorno’s frustration is not with art as such, but with ‘light and pleasant art’ (1991: 29) that tinkers on the edges, art that seeks to reproduce Neoclassical polish or Elizabethan courtliness or Romantic yearnings for the transcendental imagination. What he commends is art that looks squarely at the inequities of the world, and calls the tyrants to account; art that has a reason to exist. It must not, he insists, ‘surrender to cynicism’ (1977: 188) or fall into romantic or consolatory fantasies, but be put to the work of witnessing, and of remembering suffering and the sufferers.

If this is a fair point, then art has a serious function as a witness and a reminder of what and how we ought to be. But this undermines the insistence on art for art’s sake, or artistic freedom, because committed art cannot be autonomous; as Adorno again writes, ‘Neutralisation is the social price art pays for its autonomy’ (1977: 325). Few artists, even those who are committed in an Adorno-esque manner, would wish to rush straight into art-as-social work, or activism. Art with such serious and focused social intent runs the twin risks of becoming didactic or of exploiting the victim.

Webb notes that:

[a requirement to make socially responsible art] I believe leads to boring, tendentious work at best, and the worst excesses of Socialist Realist and Totalitarian art propaganda. I truly believe that artists should be free to make work about whatever they like – even about nothing.

Artists borrow, blend, subvert or use subjects, fact/s, propositions and half-truths to create new worlds. An art work can show, describe, suggest, state or metaphorize any number of things simultaneously, and from a variety of perspectives. ... My paintings aren’t intended as educative, rather, I make work that enables me to explore my perceptions and prejudices.

These are the possibilities for artists in times of war. Of course, they can also make didactic one-line statements.

And such statements, whether didactic or merely tendentious, are unlikely to attract viewers and hence to have the desired effect. To use Michel de Certeau’s analogy (Certeau 1984: 169), such art is like a shopping mall where there’s a preacher at every aisle, or the secret police checking your papers at every turn. No one is going to hang about under those circumstances. Work that preaches, or insists on moral purity, is irritating, dutifully worthy, or quickly dated; and so is likely to put up a wall between itself and its audience, and hence lose its power to touch people. Besides, few ‘serious’ artists wish to make tracts and slogans merely; and few wish to give up entirely the principle of working ‘for art’s sake’, or responding to their own aesthetic vision rather than focusing purely on making work that reports on, records or responds to injustice. It seems reasonable to argue, then, that one ethical response to the making of art after Auschwitz is indeed to make art, but to use that making

process to clarify our own thinking, to reflect on our own ethical position, and to consider what it means to be human in relation to other humans.

Kato can be said to have done this in her 2000 show, *Grief Transformed*, which was the first in which she overtly explored what has become a continuing focus on migration and multiculturalism. For this show she applied the Japanese paper folding art of Origami to produce the very recognisable origami crane, but used sheets of wax rather than the traditional medium of paper. These cranes were placed on a scattering of broken glass which served, in her words:

as a metaphor for violence and for the devastation of our society. At the same time, it can be seen as a water drop; especially the bird can be seen as a water lily, or tear drop. Those images symbolise the uneasy journey undertaken by migrants.

Of course it cannot be read as a migration show alone; the use of origami cranes, especially by a Japanese artist, necessarily conveys to an international audience the memory of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. Kato says again:

Another focus of the installation was the shift of meaning produced by the process of transformation. Originally, 'the thousand cranes' are known within Japanese culture as a gift for someone who is suffering from sickness. But internationally, this crane is known as the symbol of Hiroshima, for peace. Or [my use of it] may mean merely the paper folding of origami. So the function and meanings alter once the context shifts. It is impossible to say simply that the work is about Hiroshima; or simply that it is her reaction to the general media representations of 'otherness' in western society; or that it is simply the product of her imagination and/or her technical expertise. It is all these things, and possibly more, intersecting to produce this particular show. But it is certainly possible to see in this show, read in the light of her wider oeuvre, a progress of her thinking and practice. Her work 'Mother and Father and My Words' for a later show, *Migration* (Melbourne 2001), comes from a series of interviews she conducted with migrants in and around Melbourne. The installation is beautifully crafted and arranged, carefully lit, and apparently committed primarily to an aesthetic principle. But it is also a statement about the difficulty of hanging on to one's identity, one's language, and one's connections to the past in a new environment that is often hostile to immigrants (especially people of colour). The etched teardrops have the fragility and scarring that mark the migrant, the refugee, or the exile; each stone pertains to one of the people she interviewed, and is etched with the name of their father or mother, or with their favourite word in their own language and script – a reminder that as long as those who love us remain, or our words remain, we too remain, if only as traces, to unsettle the present. This is not an overtly political work; and yet her attitudes, opinions and ethics come through without being didactically expressed. In short, her work reflects her personal engagement with the world of art, the mass media, and her own ethical response to society in general, as a member of that society, and more particularly as an artist. 'For me,' she says:

making art means separating things from the world and reconstructing them with my own hands. That is the way I understand the world and reality – the relationship between me, nature and the world, which is full of such paradoxes as love, solitude, fear, hope, passion, peace and war. Life keeps circulating and revitalizing. I hope my work reflects these processes and corresponds to the fragility and strength of the human being.

Webb's 2003 show, *Face Value*, is more directly geared towards commenting on contemporary media stories and events, though still obedient to her own aesthetic and technical values, as she noted:

One of my ongoing series [shown in *Face Value*] is probably more consciously influenced by media issues in that it's a series of 'portraits' which challenge the status of both the subjects and the genre of portrait painting. Because the work is intended to ask questions about guilt and innocence, they're definitely influenced by media stories, but it's also true that I carefully choose subjects with interesting features rather than just anyone who's appeared in a story of nefarious, evil or downright criminal dealings. For instance, I can't imagine choosing John Howard's face, and I found George W a real headache because he is both a bad man and one who has that in his features.

She pointed out too that her portraits are not meant to be direct representations of the subjects; the strength of paintings is that they resist a firm and direct identity as narrators of 'truths,' in the sense of empirically grounded matter, or reportage, because:

In our society, paintings are not taken seriously, they are not seen as truths, and this is their great strength. While an image can also be used for lies (witness the biased images on our TV screens), a painting, made through time and space, can only provoke, confront or suggest...

The paintings in this show are indeed provocative and confrontational. Each portrait is carefully crafted and beautifully representative, each person is clearly himself, though reduced to head alone, and thus denatured, in effect. Her George W Bush is being absorbed, though, into the dark vacuum that presents as a kind of negative aureole about his head, his stupid little eyes and mouth reduced to child's proportions – infinitely naïve, infinitely terrifying (and an infinite headache). Her nineteen terrorists are represented each in their specificity, and as individual men; they are never 'the mass', and never fulfilling the obvious stereotypical signifiers of fundamentalist Islam. Moreover, each of these portraits is very small, particularly when juxtaposed with the huge painting of George W Bush as they were in the exhibition. Their acts of violence, this implies, certainly caused horror, terror and pain, but in a contained and limited way, unlike the possibility of ramifying violence indicated in Bush's portrait. So, do artists have a responsibility to respond to current events, issues, or disasters? Yes, and no. Webb said:

I don't feel any responsibility whatsoever. As a person I do, but as an artist I refuse that responsibility because I think that my work would grow boring and one-dimensional if I took it on. At the same time, I do feel strongly that artists do reflect their times, and so, as a person who cares deeply about human rights issues, that is bound to come out sometimes in my work. I always think about where Goya would've ended up if he'd *had* to make work about human rights issues. He chose to make terrifying work about the horrors of war, the foolishness of people, but he also made marvellous portraits of the ruling Spanish aristocracy. I think that artistic choice is our only real freedom, partial and mediated as it is.

Kato's position was similar:

I think as an artist, we have a big responsibility to show how we interpret the current world situation. We must, because artists are the opinion leaders to some extent, and have a power to show our inside to the public. But at the same time, we don't have to make work about 'it.' We have freedom to create and express whatever we want to. I suppose what I think is that we must have some attitude to and opinion about what we believe as artists. But these will come through naturally, without our attempting making work for it. And that is fine. For example, people may not think my recent work is about 'migration' but that is fine. My recent work is more personal and ambiguous. But it doesn't mean that I don't care about those issues anymore.

Other artists go even further; Adorno warned of the risks involved in using an aesthetic stylisation to make ‘an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed’ (1997: 189). How can we make visible the appalling inequities in the world without exploiting those in its grip? The South African poet Antjie Krog, who was also appointed to report on and respond to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, wrote in her personal account of that Commission: ‘One has no right to appropriate a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction;’ and, ‘No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this. So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don’t, I die’ (Krog 1998: 49).

The ethical dilemma at stake is not answerable by a clearcut directive, or by the ordered chaos of, say, Stalinism, or what ends in the Holocaust, but is better engaged with in the small individual instances and gestures of particularity, where they can retain an ambiguity, a series of contradictions, an open-endedness that reflects the messiness of everyday life. The South African artist William Kentridge writes in this respect that:

daily living is made up of a non-stop flow of incomplete contradictory elements, impulses and sensations. But the arresting thing for me is not this disjunction itself, but the ease with which we accommodate it. It takes a massive personal shock for us to be more than momentarily moved (Kentridge 1999: 103).

Art is unlikely ever to deliver that massive personal shock, but it can act as a dripping tap, an ongoing reminder that things are not as they might be. This is not to say it’s the task of every artist to confront and to change the world. But it is, I would suggest, the task of artists to engage with the world in a way that is in accordance with their own self-reflective, considered ethical standpoint. It’s specious to suggest that art must be politically engaged; that artists must be always watching for shifts away from an ethical standard and ready to cry out like prophets against it. But it’s also specious to pretend that artists – any artists – are not inflected by contexts in which they’re living, and the media in which they are immersed. We make work as responses to the events that have touched us, that have crossed our paths and our consciousness. The ethical dilemma, to my mind, is not how we report or record the things around us, but that in our telling or imaging of the stories of our time we manage to avoid setting our own views and interpretations in stone; and that we avoid standing on the shoulders of the suffering in our attempt to reach the stars. And if Adorno was right after all, and it is barbaric to write poetry (or art, more generally) after Auschwitz, then perhaps that’s a barbarism that will allow us to use all the horror and all the energy it generates to make works that avoid idealism, and yet might shake loose entrenched attitudes and hint at alternative ways of being.

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Muhammed Atta's Eyes



George Speight's mouth



Installation, Te Manawa (NB: separate pix of the 19 terrorists and Bush are also available)

Body work



Grief Transformed



Mother and Father and
My Words;
colour images available

