A Memory of Times Past

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Artists and writers like to think they are the people who define cultures, but in a very real sense it is governments that have the immediate say over what is seen, what is said in the name of any culture or age. Artists need to eat. This was as true of Michelangelo painting commissions for a pope as it was for Jacques Louis David who turned his proselytsing hand from revolution to paeans of praise for Napoleon Bonaparte.

Joanna Mendelssohn

In Australia, last century, what I have just written would have seemed distanced by both history and geography, and utterly absurd when applied to our own country. Political direction in the arts may have been true of the United States and the USSR during the Cold War, but this country has a long and honourable cultural history of dissent. True some of our best artists and writers were able to work against popular taste and without financial pressure only because they had private wealth. But in popular culture the boys and girls of *Oz* magazine and the *Mavis Bramston Show* flourished in the dying years of the often derided Menzies government in the 1960s. Christopher Pearson and the extremes of *Quadrant* had no difficulty during the long years of Hawke and Keating in the 1980s and 90s.

But 'official culture', the face that governments put on to show the country to the world has changed, and although those changes were set in motion well before the events of 11 September 2001, they are only now beginning to emerge as defining forces. The most public 'cleansing' took place first at the ABC in the late 1990s but this was echoed, albeit more subtly in new appointments to the Australia Council. Most recently at the National Museum of Australia there has been no attempt to hide the political agenda. No one who has taken an interest in the machinery of Australia's cultural life can be unaware of the restructuring of boards and positions of influence in the arts, and elsewhere.

The reason for the delayed impact of these changes was the one cultural event that effectively united all strands of the country, the 2000 Sydney Olympics. For two weeks in September the country infected the world with a spirit of cooperation, generosity and humanity. The combination of popular and elite cultures, of excellence in sports and arts that characterised the Olympics, effectively delayed the poison. Yet the closing ceremony, that magnificent spectacle of high camp and hedonism, gave an indication of the darker side.

For foreigners, all was light. The travel writer Bill Bryson wrote for the London *Times*: 'For 17 days, Sydney, normally the most happy and easy-going city on earth, has been the most happy and easy-going city on earth. That really is the miracle of it, if you ask me - that Sydney behaved as if putting on the biggest logistical exercise on the planet was really no trouble at all. I don't wish in my giddiness to overstate matters, but I invite you to suggest a more successful event anywhere in the peacetime history of humankind. Certainly I know of no other occasion when so many people were so continuously cheerful.' [www.times-olympics.co.uk]

The Olympics may be based in sport and the fanatical desire to win gold, but they are also spectacle. In 2000 that spectacle gave the best that this country has to offer to the world. The long planning period for any major art event meant that the culture which was presented was the culture of inclusiveness that first came to popularity under the Whitlam Government of 1972-5, and which reigned effectively unchallenged until the 1996 election of Ms Pauline Hanson to the House of Representatives.

In 2000 John Howard had not yet openly made the choice to appropriate Hanson's policies into the Liberal Party Platform, and Labor had not decided to roll over in the interests of short-term political expediency. There was another reason why the culture of division was not able to displace the Olympic spirit. The Olympics were given to the city of Sydney, and because of budgets this meant the Labor held state of New South Wales. Although the NSW Labor Party is the most politically conservative of all ALP machines, the shadow of Gough Whitlam looms large. The culture of inclusion was and remains state dogma, but by the turn of the century this inclusion was at times forced and sanitised. It was this scrubbed up version of togetherness that was presented at the opening ceremony.

Two years after the Olympics opened, the videotapes of the opening ceremony remain to remind us both of what has been lost, and of why the essence of this vision was anathema to our current political masters.

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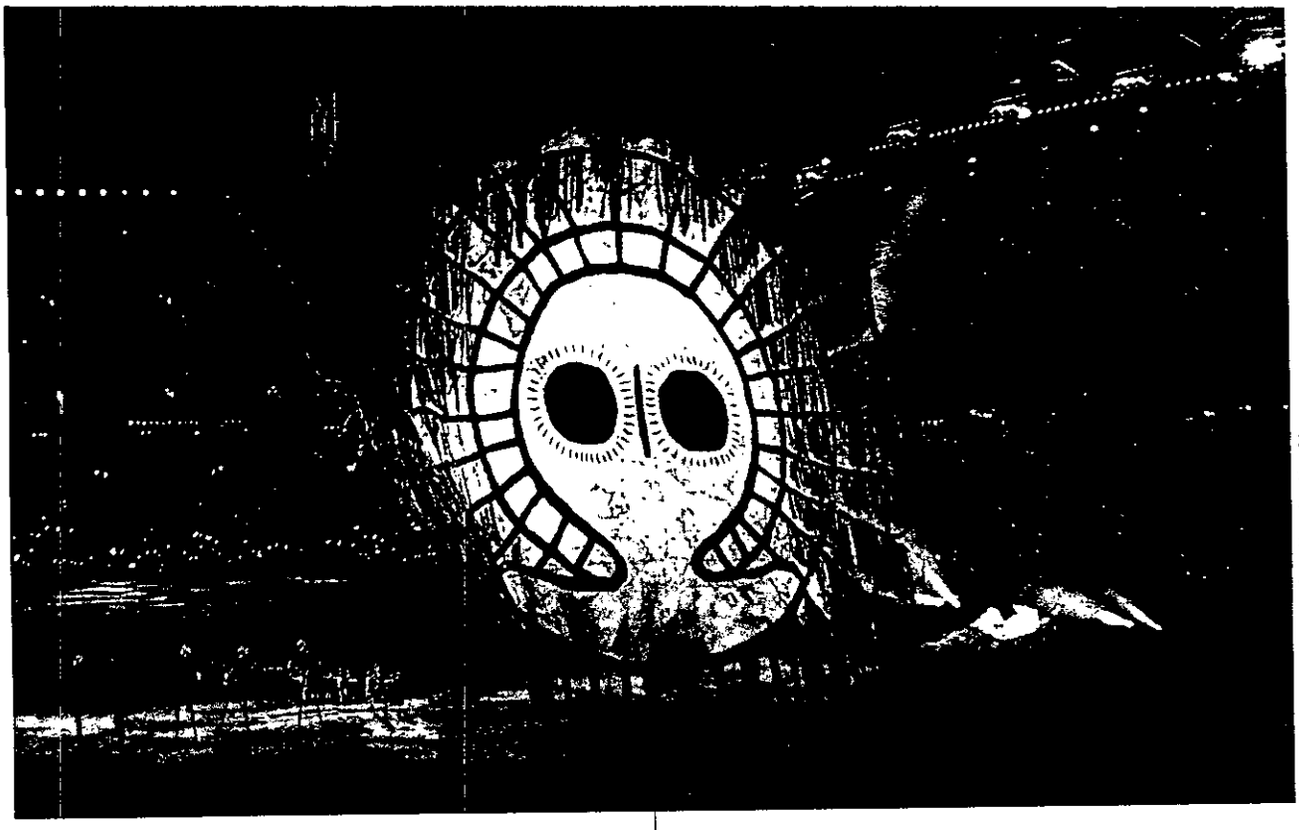

The ceremonies started quietly enough with the self conscious heroism of Drizabone-clad horsemen and women from the Snowy River, followed with Julie Anthony singing the revised third verse of *Advance Australia Fair*, a song of inclusiveness and generosity for *'those who've come across the seas'* (the second verse with its ringing conclusion of 'Britannia rules the waves' is always omitted). This verse of the National Anthem set the mood for the spectacle that followed. The pink and white Nikki Webster leaping through the giant sea creature ballet, choreographed by Meryl Tankard, the hot pink dress precisely countering the aqua of the sea. For all its amazing aerobatics Webster's routine was well within the entertainment tradition of the NSW Premier's Department's annual Senior Citizen concerts and other local spectaculars. Tankard's choreography and the design of the costumes meant that great art came to popular spectacle. The quality continued with greater profundity when Webster was joined by the songman Djakapurra Munyarryan and the choreographer Stephen Page was able to seamlessly incorporate a smoking ceremony in a giant performance by more than 1150 indigenous dancers from Australia's many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions. Ernie Dingo's television commentary emphasised the messages of reconciliation. He talked of 'sharing', 'acceptance', and 'we call all be as one mob'.

The celebration of diversity was continued in the following segment of a giant floating bush flower garden, although its choreography quoted the familiar Busby Berkeley tradition of ensemble dancing spectaculars.

It was the treatment of the English colonising of Australia that most aroused the ire of those who wished to see a monocultural triumphalist vision, yet there was deliberately no mention of the grief of displaced Indigenous people or the forced immigration of convicts. The explorers were placed on fantastic Ronald Searle inspired bicycles, complete with cat - a reference to Matthew Flinders. The 19th century forces of poverty and oppression that drove so many to come to a country at the ends of the earth were ignored. Instead the colonial past was shown in the humour of dancers dressed as Nolan's Ned Kelly paintings, and a glorious tribute to the universal bush building material of corrugated iron.

The most significant characteristic of the spectacular (to borrow a term from *Moulin Rouge*) was the way various traditions were modified to change their purpose. Tap Dogs danced a percussion hymn to industry. Bales of wool in boxes became sheep and then a celebration of post World War II suburbia in a comic dance of Victa mowers.

This dominant cultural vision was then changed into a joyous parade of the different cultures that transformed the larger Australian cities in the second half of last century. This multicultural vision was headed by spectacular African dancing. Another case of performance overcoming historical accuracy. In actuality the rich mix of the 1950s was based on Greek, Italian, Yugoslav, Jewish, Eastern European, Scots, Irish and northern English settlers of the more impoverished kind. The dance and costumes however were a metaphor for many colours and many places, all coming to form a giant human map of Australia. This was a place where the little pink girl (Nikki Webster) joined by the big black man (Djakapurra Munyarryan) could sing of 'a world of harmony', and Arthur Stace's message of Eternity could shine in lights.

This vision of Australia, reinforced by the fire and water image of Cathy Freeman holding the torch, was sustained

over the 16 days of competition. Hardened journalists marvelled at the way trains ran on time, the locals cheered for foreign competitors, and the poor African swimmer who could hardly swim one length became a crowd favourite. The international response to the bonhomie of the games was best encapsulated by Matthew Engel, writing in the *Guardian* : 'One suspects Sydney's mood of glorious self-confidence that has made these games such a triumph will sustain Australia for years.' (2 October 2000)

The closing ceremony was effectively a critique of the buffed image of the opening spectacle. Instead of physical education students and dancing schools, there were drag queens to remind the world that the most successful annual parade in Sydney is Mardi Gras. The organizational skills that made the Olympics such a successful case of stage management were honed on Oxford Street. The pubescent Nikki Webster was transformed into a junior Kylie Minogue - thereby fulfilling the dreams of students sweating it out in talent schools. Giant Kewpie Dolls danced with 50s inspired ballroom dancers while rubber thongs, the ubiquitous beachware of the Australian summer were transformed into floats. It was burlesque, it was excess, the party spirit of the end of a love affair when prawns, the cliché meal of the Aussie barbecue, rode on bicycles.

Just as the decorations and dancers in the closing ceremony moved from slick to the dark side of kitsch, so the commentary on race relations gave a counterpoint to the benign public gloss of the opening ceremony.

Peter Garrett and the Midnight Oils sang *Beds Are Burning* to a stony-faced Prime Minister, and even the abysmal US television coverage of NBC recognised that this was a powerful political statement. Earlier in the year cities around the country had been closed to traffic as hundreds of thousands of Australians marched for reconciliation. The Olympics had gladly given a message of common purpose and sharing, and now the Oils sang for justice and acknowledged there was none.

In a world ruled by logic these events would surely mean that the tide had turned and a new day was dawning. Matthew Engel's prediction that this brave new Australia would continue to sustain the faith of the world was, of course, wrong.

As I write this the government has just released its new series of advertisements, supposedly to encourage caution, but with the subtext of 'fear your neighbour'. It is a subtle variation on the government-sanctioned messages of hate that reached a crescendo a year after the Olympics. It is as though the country has now been given permission to express its collective worst feelings of fear and loathing. Ideas that once would have led to guilt or embarrassment are justified on the grounds of expediency. These ideas are not new. During World War I German settlers in South Australia were persecuted and there was even a move to expel Hans Heysen from the Society of Artists. In the late 1930s Australia rejected many Jewish refugees attempting to leave Germany. Some of those who made it to England came out here anyway to concentration camps, a prelude to our current camps.

PHOTO: Steve Christo *The Sydney Morning Herald*

In earlier generations fear and jealousy led to race riots and the murder of Chinese gold diggers at Lambing Flat in New South Wales. Fear of the unknown, whipped up by demagogues led to Australia's greatest shame, the White Australia Policy which endured from Federation until the late 1960s.

And yet I know that 180 years ago Governor Macquarie in charge of a god-forsaken penal colony, inhabited by the scum of Britain, imagined that if he treated people fairly they and their children could create a new life. His imagination led to the city that hosted the Olympics.

It may well be that the golden moments of the 2000 Olympics will remain but a memory of a past when people of different backgrounds and inclinations could work together. It may even be that this ideal of generosity was a fantasy, and that the reality of our country always was ugliness, greed and suspicion. If that is so, then it is time for us all to become fantasists and through our imaginations create a state where the main instinct is to give our fellow human beings a 'fair go'.

Joanna Mendelssohn is an art critic and Associate Professor, Art Theory, College of Fine Arts, University of NSW.

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