

# Cue for canned laughter

## ART

Sydney galleries:

Ben Vautier, Robert Combas,  
Malcolm Enright, Chris Hodges  
Milburn and Arte Gallery

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**I**T is not that galleries don't have knick-knacks, trifles and transitory trivialities; it is just that they are not accorded the even honorific title of museum or palatial home status.

The 300-plus works by four satirists at the Milburn and Arte Gallery are not likely to hear boomed over them in sepulchral, money-wise terms that they are really not truly museum material. Maybe they would fit with prints and drawings or provide ammunition for an educational art platoon on patrol, but serious, come come! Take that Chris Hodges. He actually announces that all his works are made of tin cans and wood.

As for Ben Vautier, who is undignifiably known as Ben, he has long been announcing in words on paintings that all curatorial and highfalutin notions of art are spurious, and to prove it, he mounted a small portable museum himself in the 1972 Documenta.

It is understandable, of course, for curators to be uneasy about seeing their acclaimed acquisitions confronted with *Regardez moi cela suffit* (Looking at me should suffice), or written in black on a large blue painting, *Le sud est bleu* (The south is blue), or *Art est merde*.

Yet, there have been periods when oddities were collected by other than inquisitive individuals. You are bound to find some trivial remnants of the Fluxus group in German museums and there is that famous cupboard of Dada whatnots in New York's Museum of Modern Art including Meret Oppenheim's *Fur Lined Cup and Saucer* of 1936, Robert Hughes, in his *Shock of the New*, termed it the truest symbol of female homosexuality created this century. Despite that, and though born in 1913, she had another of her wayward, trifling Dadaesque shows last year in Zurich.

True, some oddities did filter into the Power Gallery (the one at Sydney University) during the '70s: it has such treasures from the cathedrals of art as Beuys' hairy felt suit, three stones he signed and stamped from the streets of Dusseldorf, his fried fish bone in a cardboard box and the famous printed shopping bag issued during Documenta 1972, condemning the party system like ours and extolling methods of referenda and recall.

The Power Gallery has other pieces to release the subversive imagination like Stefan Weweka's *Homburg*, so narrow that the Reverend Fred Nile must have mislaid it, and Gunter Weseler's furry object fastened to a loaf of bread and breathing quietly and horribly. There was, too, the Canadian in Cologne, Robin Page, who comes closest to the madly maladroit, gently amusing satirical juxtapositions of visuals and words



*Tin-Can-No-Lan* by Chris Hodges, who tells gallery viewers that all his works are made from tin cans and wood

by Malcolm Enright at Milburn and Arte.

Page made a print of a bleeding box in the belief that boxes should bleed before humans; his models condemned the destruction of forests; he also condemned the destruction of artists, depicting the critic's cocktail with a fish hook in it. At the height of the fawning mesmerism caused by Mao, he painted himself as Mao with a Page beard and wearing a sweat shirt printed "Maona Lisa". He said all his ideas were simple but took a long time to come to him. So do Ben's.

Ben came upon us when conceptual art was asserting and sometimes demonstrating that the art object as such was inferior or irrelevant to the process of art, but Ben presented his views on the nature of art and its relationships as actual works of art.

Right here, at Milburn and Arte, he makes fun of the notion that the artist does not have special qualities. Dada had set out to prove artists were free personalities, subversive, iconoclastic, revolutionary and fathomlessly scornful of the culture that had urged on World War I.

Ben writes on his work: "I, Ben, would like to be the only artist not to be a genius", and also paints elsewhere: "I should like to make original things but also like everyone else". In another work he writes: "Regardez moi". (He can be persuaded to give out Ben badges.) On one painting is a dot labelled "This is art" and on another, "This is not art". He makes you ask what art is when his painting has but two words "Ben" and "Art". There is not much else to ask.

Is it art if it says it is and especially if it is signed? But then, Ben says he signed art in 1958 and since, death,

God, the Pope, and his own signature. Given half a chance he'd sign the Russian Red Army Choir.

Ben is never likely to sign off.

Malcolm Enright, rearranger of the visual and verbal world, has to be seen to be appreciated. He is not funny about Nurse Cavell, if you can recall her, and is amusingly chilling when he quotes with pics, John Singleton: "If your life was more like an Arnott's biscuit commercial you would be much happier than you are now."

His technique of changing style and material in these reproductions induces uncanny distances in time and between text and illustrations which he provocatively calls Inseparables. Naturally, there are those vintage Australian jokes like "Hard work never kills anyone who supervises it", politically profound assertions like "It is a democratic Australian right to whistle at good sorts" and ripostes like Gough Whitlam's "I don't go to church but I always go to cathedrals".

There is enough cunning fun in Enright to suffice most but the mysterious origins of a lot of the pics will strand the curious; no such trouble with the neat tin-smithing on wood by Chris Hodges for the cans used for various drinks are rarely out of public sight.

His gentle satire is equally evident. *Tin Can Pillers* is a thin smile at the artist who relies on squares and also at Carl Andre who laid about square steel plates and bricks in the Tate Gallery in 1972, again the year of that remarkable Documenta which included the paintings of the insane that those of Robert Combas here resemble.

However, Hodges pays further tributes to artists: *Tin-Can-Mon-Drian* is a hygienic, shining, crisp, lively Mondrian; *Tin-Can-No-Lan* is a square helmet of black beer cans cut with Kelly's peepholes. Most are in praise of consumables as the cans compose hearts, boomerangs, life-size standing cameras and fascinating and quite beautiful objects like *Solo Boomerang* and *Bar Code Boogie*.

It is all meant as good, trivial fun and with a slightly twisted view included might be the heavily lined, convoluted, clumsy fowls and humans by Robert Combas who would join Dubuffet's praise for the art of children and the demented. They are the most congested and squirming works seen around for a while.

Like Dubuffet's celebrated erotic drawings they are the antithesis of the noble, charming and significant, pushing caricature to ecstatic extremes. Outside the museum, Combas says, all life is a Laocoon.

We do need such respites from the blockbuster shows. In that same remarkable year, 1972, Willy Rotzler produced his *Objekt-Kunst von Duchamp bis Kienholz*. It ran from African fetishes, through Picasso's bicycle saddle pretending to be a bull's head, Oppenheim's shows joined toe-to-toe (Barry Humphries is another version) and Wesselmann's *Bedroom Tit Box*.

Curators are blameless this time. That cannot be put in a museum. We don't have to be assailed by monstrous paintings and sculptures as though we were in the late 19th century. The insignificant object may be more profound than you guess. You can understand why people like the privacy and even the tedium of video.