

Let's Do The Accounts

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Finding a way into addressing the theme of 'accountability' for this edition of LAI's journal MATTER has been a rather fraught affair. As an art institute our immediate energies have been drawn into the existential crisis of our industry, our sector and it has to be said, our own viability. At the intersection of the tertiary sector and the arts sector, LAI sits in the overlapping centre of a Venn diagram of federal government neglect. It would be provocative for me to say it was wilful neglect. So I'll just let that sentiment be that sentence.

The year started off in a hellish nightmare of hazardous smoke in capital cities, ecosystems ablaze, species decimated, businesses obliterated, homes and lives lost. Several months into a global pandemic and it's as if that national disaster, that massive psychological shock to our collective nervous system, was a lifetime ago. We've rolled from national disaster to international disaster and we've had to do it isolated from our friends, families and peers. While we work to suppress the damage of a virus – at the mercy of systems of organisation, power and control – we are acutely aware of decisions that impact our lives. The notion of accountability is an ever-present flavour in the zeitgeist. It pre-dates the pandemic and it remains a weighty occupant of our times. Sports-rorts, travel rorts, falsified reports, branch stacking, dynamiting sacred sites, marching in the streets, JobKeeper, superannuation access, and the sexism inherent in the way in which the depleted economy affects women disproportionately. That much and more in a cavalcade of honestly-what-the-hell-is-next, 2020?!

Before we stray too far into the changing socio-political landscape by way of the changing natural landscape let's reassert our sights on the proximal concern of LAI and ensure we only navigate the waters of our own territory of authority. Let's work our way through a notion of accountability via the prism of art. Let us take as our catalyst a piece from the University Collection, working to gather threads from within the art itself, like a bouquet of balloons, and try to take account of accountability.

June Ethel Stevenson's oil painting *The Protestors and the Men at the Top* has been flushed up from the University's Collections (we have over 10,000 artworks and artefacts in the Collections that LAI has custodianship over). Our team is working on a show with a politically oriented theme, loosely titled *If Not Now, When?* so this work has found its way into the draft line-up. It also happens to provide us with a field of windows into a myriad of contexts for addressing notions of accountability. Let's move through them quickly and efficiently, in the interests of expediency, noting that our failure to grapple with them through a time-rich investment into their complexity is exactly one of the reasons they never got dealt with properly in the first place.



LTU0454 June Ethel Stephenson *The Protestors and The Men at the Top*

Let's first acknowledge that we don't have a date for this artwork in our records. Let's flag that a matter of accountability. LAI is responsible for the custodianship of about \$24m worth of art and artefacts. We really should know the date this work was created. We know we received it in 1985, so it's at least as old as that – which is going to be important when I start delving into its content. But for now, that failure of attention to detail is a failure of care. That's on us. Even if the data retention failure pre-dates any of the staff now working here. We inherit the accountability along with the custodianship. This artwork's most recently accessible valuation, certainly remotely via our laptops, was way back in 1992 when it was valued at \$4500. That's nearly three decades ago. Let's flag that as a matter of accounting accountability too. Again, that's on us.

Let's talk value, real quick. This painting is an asset. It is worth about as much as, let's say, a pretty decent printer you might have in a small office hooked up to a network of staff using it. Just the sort of thing a large organisation might buy, or lease. The painting's value will increase (if the artwork was thoughtfully acquired). Every year, over time, it keeps growing in value. The printer's value will decrease. Every year, going down in value, worth less and less until it's worthless.

I reckon we know exactly when we acquired our office printer. There'll be a receipt or a lease contract carefully filed in an easily accessible archive. But we don't know when we acquired this painting. Even though that painting is the same 'value'. Even though it will *increase* in value, sitting in our balance sheet as an appreciable asset, likely growing faster than inflation and growing the financial asset base of the organisation.

Such things are the purview of an arts worker's interest in accountability.

Back to the task at hand. Art. Art is a prism through which we strive to understand who we are, where we are going and what we are making our way through. I mentioned the date of our artwork in question earlier. That's relevant. Look at the issues raised in this painting through the text on the placards of the protestors. This is at least 35 years ago. People are still demanding the same things in protests on our streets in 2020.

Look now at the title – *The Protestors and the Men at the Top* – especially that latter part. Notions of gender and strata. Contemporary concerns might ask you to consider race too. With art, sometimes what is omitted is as significant as what is included. The potency of negative space is part of that.

Now to the placards, with a precis of annotated reflection:

You can not sink some one else's end of the boat without sinking your own

- Do you think using a metaphor of boats is an accident in a country that celebrates one type of boat arrival with statues and another with prison camps in small tropical nations? Unless you count that boat sculpture on the PM's desk, 'I Stopped These'.
- How do we relate to each other in terms of our collective right to protection and care within the confines of this large 'land vessel' in the southern seas of the planetary Earth? Is Australia not a boat itself?

Campaign against rape. Do we have to be murdered before we are believed

- Violence against women is a national shame. It is so endemic and so entrenched you could raise this placard right now in Swanston St with compete contemporary authenticity. And just as a reminder, now is a good time to reflect upon the painting's title "... and the Men at the Top". Sometimes, in art, context is everything.

Leave uranium in the ground. Develop solar energy

- Let's go for blowing up a sacred site at Juukan Gorge as a methodology for extracting minerals from within our boat, I mean, continent. So that's mining. And then let's go for how many Prime Ministers has Australia had toppled since 2006 that could be attributed to their stance on energy and climate policy? And how many of those were ousted outside of the election cycle?

What can we do about job creation?

- Jobs and Growth™. JobKeeper. JobSeeker. JobMaker. The best form of welfare is a job. Jobs for the boys. When governments like to say they've created jobs isn't it actually true that, at best, they've *helped* create *some* of the *conditions* for jobs to be created rather than the government actually creating the jobs.

Reduce taxation

- Does taxation act like a brake on economic activity? How do we tax just enough to pay for hospitals and schools without taxing too much and depressing economic motivation?

Less power to unions

- In a move designed to allow for a more convivial state of play in negotiations for economic recovery, the government has dropped plans for its 'The Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Amendment (Ensuring Integrity) Bill'. At our organisation the union and the management have worked together to lower our pay in the hope of lowering the sackings.

Save our forests, ban wood chips

- After the recent devastating bushfires, there have been attempts to resume logging in some of the areas actually affected by those very fires. Habitat loss for species we use to market our tourism to the world and species most of us don't even know we have in our ecology. Is there a new appreciation for Indigenous land management practices or will conservative agendas continue to blame, ironically, conservation philosophies? It's the greenies and their green tape what done it.

Abolish all death duties, they are an iniquity. What about the ones who just missed out and still have today?

- The ALP lost an election it was widely expected to win. A complexity of reasons why. The disinformation ecology in our national discourse is part of that complexity. Nothing is as scary in a false fear campaign as death. Add tax to death and WHAM! Tweet it for bonus political capital.

Revise our education system

- Look out. We've landed on the button for self-reflexivity again. Institutional critique. Today I am being asked to vote on whether I should take a pay cut to delimit the amount of people about to get sacked at the University. I, and my colleagues, are being asked to make a sacrifice in order to avoid hundreds of people losing their livelihoods. We are accountable for the loss and the scale. In that atmosphere, fractured physically from my colleagues, it's hard not to imagine a government whose ambivalence about its investment in education generated the conditions in which the education sector felt compelled to secure new revenue streams through means which may have exposed them to various forms of risk.

This exercise in putting an artwork through a sort of critical appraisal of its content is just the sort of investigative intellectual exercise that makes art a powerful tool of learning. Now imagine a situation in which a government might look to increase the cost of students accessing just this very type of learning. Huh. Imagine.

That was a wild little ride. All it took was a bit of rambling curiosity through the shapes, colours and forms painted onto a piece of fabric from about three and a half decades ago. Thanks for playing a game of contemporary concerns filtered through historical expressions. We've got 10,000 of these objects and every single one is a complex array of insight and catalytic intellectual

activity. It's hard to take account of every single one but we have to approach our care of them with an awareness of accountability. From why we bought them to who made them; from how much they are valued financially to which facility we house them in; from what we do with them to how we talk about them. For in each one is a method for contemporary reflection.