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# Art Criticism by Media Proxy

## Reporting Deviance as Art News

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*Abstract: New Zealand's participation in the 2005 Venice Biennale was met with a firestorm of mediatised criticism to a large extent fueled by an interview broadcast nation-wide on the prime-time current affairs show, *Holmes*, conducted by the popular media personality and host, Paul Holmes. Ostensibly, this live studio discussion held with John Gow, an Auckland art dealer, and Peter Biggs, Chair of the government-funded arts development agency Creative New Zealand, was an opportunity for the guests to defend the controversial selection of the artist collective et al. as New Zealand's representative to the Venice Biennale. Instead, the programme became a remarkable media event featuring a performance of disdain as Holmes, speaking on behalf of "mainstream" New Zealand, sneered, rolled his eyes, interrupted and mocked his guests and the artists' work. Subsequent media debates concerning contemporary art, arts funding policies and New Zealand's participation in future Venice Biennales have centred on many of the issues raised by Holmes in his guise as critic at large. This paper, however, focuses on the initiating event itself, examining the discourse of deviance displayed throughout the Holmes interview and considering how this key indicator of newsworthiness operates as journalistic art criticism pitched to the public sphere. Championing consensus values of mainstream New Zealanders and focusing on a dramatic narrative of failure, Holmes takes the role of investigative reporter uncovering government corruption and the exploitation of citizens, the murky backroom operations of an elitist art world and pseudonyms and secret identities suggesting something clandestine or unstable. The outcome of this dramatic spectacle has been a sharply polarized public opinion and debate that ultimately may impact New Zealand's participation in future international biennales. The Holmes broadcast as a catalyst for public outcry suggests the lack of a stable discourse of art criticism that can adjudicate cultural ambiguity and identity in visual representation, a void filled by the spectacle of "talk-back" media that fails as an appropriate forum for effective arts journalism and can only manipulate the reflex to the situation without clarifying any of its significance.*

Keywords: Arts Journalism, Art Criticism, Visual Arts Criticism, Deviance, Public Sphere, Art and Media, Venice Biennale

### Introduction

**A**FTER MANY YEARS of urging and advocacy by members of the art world, Creative New Zealand, the country's government-sponsored arts funding organization, finally announced in 2000 that New Zealand would participate in the Venice Biennale and that a total of \$1.5 million would be allocated to fund exhibits for three Biennales. The artists selected for the 2001 and 2003 Venice Biennales conveyed a distinctly local flavour. Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, chosen for New Zealand's inaugural Biennale, are each of European and Maori descent and affiliated with the Ngai Tahu tribe. Their installations in the exhibit *Bi-polar* explored the tensions produced through the interplay of culture, identity, context and representation (Burke, 2001). Michael Stevenson, the next Biennale artist, created a more generally Kiwiana-focused installation with *This is the Trekka* featuring two 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kiwi inventions, the Trekka, the only automobile ever produced by New

Zealand, and the Moniac, a water-driven analogue computer designed to demonstrate economic systems (Craig, 2003). The response of the domestic press to these artists' Venice exhibits was generally positive, although reporting was minimal, primarily descriptive and focused on the organizational features of the events rather than on any critical account or assessment of the artistic achievement of the NZ artists. When et al.<sup>1</sup> was selected as New Zealand's representative to the 2005 Venice Biennale, Creative New Zealand was unprepared for the ensuing controversy.

The initiation of this firestorm of mediatised criticism was fueled to a large extent by an interview broadcast nationwide on the prime-time current affairs show, *Holmes*, conducted by the show's popular host, Paul Holmes. Framed as a public affairs debate focusing on an issue of social concern, the spending of tax payers' money to send a controversial artist to the Venice Biennale, this live studio discussion held with John Gow, an Auckland art dealer, and Peter Biggs, Chair of Creative New Zealand, was

<sup>1</sup> The name et al. identifies a group of alternative personae created by the artist Merylyn Tweedie to represent the distinctive facets of her artistic expression. Insisting on anonymity and on the group as a public persona is essential to et al.'s artistic practice, but has been a source of frustration for the media. A brief overview of the collective's membership and practice is presented below.



supposedly an opportunity for the guests to defend the selection of the artists' collective et al. as New Zealand's representative. Instead, the programme became a remarkable media event featuring a performance of disdain as Holmes, speaking on behalf of a "mainstream" New Zealand, interrupted, sneered, rolled his eyes and mocked his guests and the artwork. Subsequent media debates concerning contemporary art, arts funding policies and New Zealand's participation in future Venice Biennales have centred on many of the issues raised by Holmes in his guise as critic at large.

This paper focuses on the initiating event itself, examining the discourse of deviance enacted by Holmes and considering how this key indicator of newsworthiness operates as journalistic art criticism pitched to the public sphere. Rather than a positive story focusing on the pride generated by New Zealand's participation in an international art event and providing space for explaining the strategy of the choice, Holmes displays a confrontational and negative approach. Championing consensus values of conservative New Zealanders and focusing on dramatic narratives of failure, Holmes takes the role of the investigative reporter uncovering government corruption and the exploitation of citizens, the murky backroom operations of an elitist art world and pseudonyms and secret identities suggesting something clandestine or unstable. This spectacle has sharply polarized public opinion and incited debate that may ultimately constrain New Zealand's participation in future international biennales. The *Holmes* broadcast as a catalyst for public outcry suggests the lack of a stable discourse of art criticism that can adjudicate cultural ambiguity and identity in visual representation, a void filled by the spectacle of "talk-back" media that fails as an appropriate forum for effective arts journalism and can only manipulate the reflex to the situation without clarifying any of its significance.

### **Newsworthiness Considered; or the Importance of Reporting Deviance**

Deviance describes behaviour that departs from socially accepted standards such as serious criminal behaviour, but also applies to behaviours that are the focus of this discussion: institutional failures and violations of common-sense knowledge (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987). News organizations are fascinated with stories of controversy and deviance. In fact, research has established dimensions of deviance and negativity, including the dramatic, sensational and unusual, as criteria for news selection and in verifying newsworthiness (Shoemaker, Chang, & Brendlinger, 1987; Graber, 1989; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Fundamental to these newsworthiness criteria, according to Fiske (1987), is the selection

and presentation of events "that disrupt or restore equilibrium. The state of equilibrium is not itself newsworthy, and is never described except implicitly in its opposition to the state of disequilibrium which, typically, is described in detail" (p. 139). Signs of disorder and procedural failure in relation to social order and change and behaviour "that strays from the normal" (Ericson et al., 1987, p. 4) demarcate the limits of social tolerance, define what constitutes social order and identify directions for change and improvement. Rather than omitting stories of disorder and deviance altogether, mainstream media may present them, but in a fragmentary and underexplored way. Often these news stories are significantly abbreviated and ideologically situated as simplified narratives of failure that reduce key events to recurring, recognisable narratives juxtaposing images of deviance and conformity as well as heroes and villains (Protess et al., 1991; Barak, 1994). Journalism's ideological positioning is most apparent in its selecting and describing disruptive versus socially acceptable events.

Normality is reaffirmed in its routine presentation and in contrast with what is deviant. Some people and groups are portrayed frequently, in powerful positions or in a positive light, while others are marginalised by being ignored, presented less advantageously or positioned outside the mainstream. Although seemingly autonomous, as the values of objectivity and truth-seeking traditionally ascribed to journalists would suggest, media institutions serve a hegemonic function of social control by producing a coherent ideology promoting a set of values and norms that legitimate a hegemonic social structure (Gitlin, 1979; Gitlin, 1980/2003), the purpose of which is to promote and reconstitute social stability. These values and norms appear unmanufactured, emerging "naturally" from the journalistic news gathering routines and from the interactions between media and centres of power. A most obvious example of this occurs in journalists' reliance on official news sources.

Journalists do not merely report facts to reflect reality; they also interpret events to explain the significance of a news story. The routine of objectivity, however, prevents them from expressing their own viewpoint. Instead, journalists locate experts as news sources, such as those with specialised knowledge operating in official capacities, to put events into context and explain the meaning of the news (Johnson-Cartee, 2005). In the process of developing contacts and ensuring future access to their sources, journalists may ally themselves with agents of social control, such as officials, politicians, corporations and other authorities of social control and by association implicate themselves as "agents of control" (Ericson et al., 1987, p. 8).

Representing deviance underscores the “normal” social order, while also promoting the perception of journalists as watchdogs. In this role, journalists look after the public’s well-being, for instance, by uncovering organizational failures, revealing special interest groups’ agendas and explaining and interpreting the complexities of governmental bureaucracies (Johnson-Cartee, 2005). The investigative “journalist-as-watchdog”, uncovering wrongdoing uncovering wrongdoing and revealing those responsible, seeks to provoke public outrage (Glasser & Ettemer, 1989) and produce social change. While such public advocacy is noble, Westerståhl and Johansson (1986) argue that investigative journalism’s focus on controversy rather than “straight news” (p. 146) has evolved into what they call confrontational or critical journalism, which emphasises presenting opposing viewpoints. Conflict and its counterpart, drama, are essential to news stories and especially investigative reporting, which, according to Johnson-Cartee (2005), requires constructing “narratives that establish the forces of evil and the forces of good” (p. 84). In the process of fulfilling their role as public watchdogs, journalists often become the heroes of their own stories.

### **Art: Deviance as Norm**

Western societies typically identify artists with the socially unconventional, deviant or abnormal. Since antiquity, artists were thought to have some innate quality, perhaps instinctual or pathological, that sets them apart from others and positioned them on the margins of society (Becker, 1978; Gilman, 1992; Cubbs, 1994). Overall, the cultural myth of the artist as rebel, misfit and eccentric has been well-entrenched. These disruptive characteristics have been refashioned into the less threatening, and more acceptable, attribute of “creativity”, but typically the social value of art and artists has been culturally marginalised. “In the public arena”, according to Carol Becker (2002), “the place of art is relegated to the quadrant known as entertainment, leisure, or culture. Its importance is severely circumscribed ...” (p. 33). This position changes when artists, in particular those that are innovative and unconventional, acquire an exceptional social status especially of a political sort. They then acquire a different social status and significance and become easy targets for the press.

When journalists portray some groups as deviant or out of step with society, they use this representation to generate debate on how these groups, such as those supporting views that are radical or alternative to the status quo, may be reincorporated into the cultural template (Ericson et al., 1987). This practice often applies in the case of journalists’ news stories

about artists as well. However, artists often resist the normative values promoted by agents of social control such as the press. As Becker (2002) observes, instead of being reinscribed into the norms of society, artists may take pleasure in their unconventional position:

Artists flock to the ambiguities and the marginalities that cause others to flee. They find inspiration in the disorder of urban life. Aware of and even known to revel in their own otherness, artists desire environments where they do not need to conform to a uniform version of adult behavior... [T]heir work encourages disequilibrium... (p. 5)

Deviance is necessary to the expressive activities of artists, and therefore art by its very nature is a resistant practice that conflicts with normative social experience. In other words, as Williams (2004) argues, “deviance is best understood as fundamentally artistic” (p. 234) and essential to artists’ creative existence.

### **Dramatis Personae: The Key Players**

#### ***Paul Holmes: The Impresario***

In 1989, Television New Zealand (TVNZ) offered Paul Holmes, at the time a newstalk host on the number one-rated morning radio programme, the opportunity to simultaneously host his own television current affairs show, *Holmes* (Holmes, 1999). This programme remained the largely uncontested leader in current affairs broadcasting within the limited television broadcasting landscape until Holmes resigned over failed contract negotiations in November 2004 to host a new current affairs show, *Paul Holmes*, on the recently established, free-to-air station, Prime. Holmes has garnered notoriety both locally and internationally for his often-confrontational interviewing style and defamatory remarks about public figures. One of the more notorious moments occurred during his NewsTalkZB morning radio show in September 2003, when he called the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan a “cheeky darkie” in response to Annan’s speech concerning the United States’ invasion of Iraq. This event not only resulted in strong negative national and international condemnation, but also led to key advertiser Mitsubishi revoking its \$1 million annual sponsorship from the *Holmes* television show (Boland, 2003; Kiriona, 2003). More recently, in June 2006 he referred to the Green Party as the party of “the hippies ... the far-left, the remnants of the alliance, anti-free traders, apologists for Mao, communist sympathisers, the enemies of science and the rabid, irrational anti-GM movement” (Broadcast Standards Authority, 2006).

Over the course of his long and well-established media career, Holmes has cultivated a large following of devoted listeners and viewers among the more middle-aged, conservative New Zealand population, and his consistently nationalist and anti-radical statements appeal to this audience.

### **John Gow: The Respected Art Dealer/Businessman**

The son of art collectors and gallery owners, John Gow is a founding director of the Gow Langsford Gallery, which was established in 1987, and a founding member of the New Zealand Contemporary Art Dealers Association (Gow Langsford Gallery, 2006). Highly regarded as an authority on both historical and contemporary New Zealand art, Gow acts as a consultant to private collectors, corporations, museums and public institutions. In addition, he is frequently sought by the media to analyse art-related events and comment on issues of authenticity as well as the value and significance of New Zealand art. In his media role as “an acknowledged expert” or “news shaper” (Soley, 1992), Gow provides background on a subject about which journalists and most members of the public may know little, and as an official source he may be assumed to be unbiased and impartial. However, Gow is also a well-established art dealer and promoter of distinctly New Zealand art, and as such his aesthetic position operates in relation to public taste and the forces of the marketplace. From the outset, he was a vocal critic of the Venice Biennale panel’s selection of et al. as New Zealand’s representative.

### **Peter Biggs: The Beleaguered Spokesman**

In 2003 Peter Biggs received awards recognizing both his contribution to culture (Wellingtonian of the Year) and his business and leadership skills (Agency Chief Executive of the Year). He has had over twenty years’ experience in advertising and public relations and was Managing Director of one of New Zealand’s leading advertising agencies representing a number of high-profile clients including, significantly enough, Mitsubishi (“More,” 2003). In 1997, he was voted “Speaker of the Decade” by Rostrum, Australasia’s largest public speaking organization and is often engaged to speak to groups on the topics of leadership, excellence and creativity (Rotary Club of Auckland, 2006; Braunias, 2004). Biggs was appointed Chair of the New Zealand Arts Council (the governing body of Creative New Zealand) in 1999 and reappointed in 2003. As Chair of this organization he is, of course, invested in its administration and decision-making and acts as its spokesperson and champion.

### **Et al.: The Media-Shy Artists’ Collective**

Although not physically present during the discussion that took place on the *Holmes* show on the evening of 14 July 2004, as the catalyst for the media event, the artists’ collective et al. was definitely present in spirit. The name “et al.” refers to a collection of artists, including lionel b., merit grötting, blanche ready-made, c j (arthur) craig and sons, p. mule, who have worked singly or in various combinations to produce conceptual art since the 1970s. In reality, the individual artists that comprise the collective are themselves pseudonyms for conceptual artist Merylyn Tweedie who began exhibiting in 1975, although the name “MT was dropped quite a while ago” (Lotringer, 2003, p. 114). Unfortunately, the lack of a specific spokesperson combined with the vast array of names and the elusiveness of these artists have become the focus of attention rather than the art itself, precisely the effect that the collective endeavored to avoid through pseudonyms. Vicente (2005) explains that rather than being an elitist gesture for its own sake, the use of the name et al. is “pivotal to their artistic practice” demonstrating a concern with “issues of authorship and originality, arguing against the emphatic role played by biography in art history in categorizing and creating artist identities heavily based in gender” (p. 77).

Each of the artist entities works in different mediums to contribute to the collective’s artistic enterprises. These are primarily readymade installations incorporating discarded, broken and rejected objects, which are often recombined and sometimes painted, including junked computers, monitors, office furniture, wall charts, construction site equipment, port-a-loos, metal mesh fencing, audio materials and texts. Recent installations, using materials borrowed and recycled from previous works, have explored technology, communication, systems of mind control and social control in relation to hegemonic institutions. Generally acknowledged as difficult, overwhelming and even disturbing, et al.’s work calls into question conventional aesthetic assumptions about the artist, creativity and art and its social function.

The notorious work that provoked an outcry from journalists, politicians and the public was *Rapture* (2004) by p. mule for et al. Journalists focused on certain features of this installation—the port-a-loo and an audio track that occasionally emitted the sound of a braying donkey—but neglected its other features: the underwater recording of six underground nuclear tests carried out in 1996 by the French government in the Pacific and heard as extremely loud, low frequency rumblings that shook the gallery, a small figurine of a mule and a projection of a computer screen plotting a sine or sound wave (Rees, 2004). At a basic level this work presents an ominous perspective linking nuclear

weapons with our ultimate fate (i.e., being in the crapper); taking into consideration the local context, the work also recalls New Zealand's staunch resistance to nuclear testing, especially in the Pacific region, as well as this country's historically chilly relationship with France, perhaps represented by the sounds of the braying ass. These by no means exhaust the work's possible interpretations. However, rather than make the effort to locate expert sources that might have been able to shed some light on the meaning of the work, most journalists instead chose to focus on its deviant and negative qualities, drawing attention to elements that, out of context, turned the work into something bizarre and ridiculous.

### Overview: Setting the Scene

Before discussing the *Holmes* broadcast of 14 July 2004, a brief overview of the context and political atmosphere leading up to the show may be useful. On 3 July 2004, when Creative New Zealand announced that et al. would be going to the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale, the initial media response to this announcement consisted of a few newspaper items that reported the story without commentary. Appropriately, the first in-depth discussion of the selection took place on TV One's current affairs arts programme, *Frontseat*, broadcast on Sunday, 4 July at 10:15pm, and hosted by Oliver Driver. This episode featured a discussion/debate between Peter Biggs and Josie McNaught, the only journalist to attend and report on the previous Venice Biennale, and raised many of the issues that would be echoed ten days later on the *Holmes* show. Arguably, this particular programme could be considered the initiator of the debate, but it did not generate the reaction that followed immediately after the *Holmes* broadcast, probably due to its late Sunday time slot and limited target audience.

Another key event was a press release on 13 July by Deborah Coddington, a former journalist, who was at that time a Member of Parliament, and Arts, Culture and Heritage Spokesperson for ACT New Zealand. In this role, Coddington opposed Prime Minister Helen Clark, who holds the Labour Party's Arts, Culture and Heritage portfolio. In her press release, Coddington demanded that Clark explain why "it's a good idea to spend \$500,000 on a port-a-loo that makes donkey noises, and then explodes, in the name of art". She went on to accuse the minister of "the typical arrogant elitism that gives the arts a bad name" and summarily dismissed the artists' work as "crap—and most New Zealanders know it" (Coddington, 2004). With the 2005 general election on the horizon, Coddington has made the art news story a political opportunity, highlighting elements that could embarrass the ruling government. The media

picked up on the story with greater interest, and the next day it was covered on morning radio broadcasts, the TV One evening news television broadcast and then the *Holmes* show, after which news coverage intensified until the end of the month. Coverage continued sporadically until the end of October when the Walters Prize, New Zealand's richest and most prestigious contemporary art award, was announced. Renowned curator Robert Storr, acting as judge, selected et al. from among four finalists, in effect providing international validation of the artists and silencing the critics.

### Holmes: Control Agent

#### *Managing the Message*

A true showman, Holmes uses rhetorical strategies and entertainment to create a compelling relationship with his viewers. From the outset Holmes establishes a common ground through his language. For example, Holmes' introduction signals his populist position and demonstrates a shared concern with working citizens when he poses the question: "Should we, the taxpayers, be stumping up half a million dollars to send to the Venice Biennale, ... the work of an artist whose latest work is a toilet braying like a donkey?" (Keane, 2004; this reference applies to all subsequent quotes from *Holmes* broadcast.) Holmes also employs an exaggerated and entertaining presentation style. After the background field report setting up the discussion, Holmes presents with mercurial skill and within a few seconds an entertaining tirade which outlines the issue's key problems: the confusing identity of the artists and their resistance to publicity, the incomprehensibility of difficult art and the academic elitism and exclusivity of the art world. He illustrates the last point through impersonation, mocking Tina Barton, art historian and member of the selection committee, who had attempted to explain the historical construction of the artist's identity: "The very idea of the cult of the artist or the fascination with the name of the artist is a very historic specific category." Opening his eyes wide and nodding his head from side to side, Holmes affects the mincing vocal tone of a female academic ridiculing Barton's intellectual discourse. The showman then disdainfully rolls his eyes and in a lowered voice says, "Whatever that means". Suddenly, and with indignation, he urges the audience to "please feel free to throw up", and then taking on the mantle of the outraged journalist, he makes a show of his effort to present a balanced programme by vehemently tapping his desk with his pen while complaining that "nobody from the selection panel would front up on the programme tonight, not one of the people who made the selection to go to the Venice Biennale would front up to this

programme to justify that selection.” Holmes’ unfolding array of behaviours is an entertaining and engaging performance.

### **Exploiting the Medium’s Constraints**

In addition to using language and performance to captivate his viewers, Holmes also exploits the constraints of the programme’s format and studio environment to control his guests’ communication and appearance. First of all, the medium’s time limitations justify a brisk interview approach. During the introduction, Holmes presented an overview of the upcoming show with a brief set up for the three stories to be presented in the course of the half-hour programme. The pre-announced outline of the show, along with the requisite advertising breaks, suggests a limited time frame within which each segment must be completed. In fact, after subtracting the time for the background report, the interview amounts to only 7 minutes and 9 seconds, a time constraint that not only necessitates, but also supports the host’s need to hurry guests through their answers and to interrupt, and even bully, them if they are not addressing the issues satisfactorily.

Holmes, however, has from the outset of his television career been known for his aggressive and confrontational interviewing style (Staff, 1989) and we see evidence of this style in his treatment of Peter Biggs. Holmes controls the discussion by interrupting and speaking at the same time as Biggs, who is able to complete only two statements without interruption and never allowed to explain issues in depth. Reacting to Holmes’ frequent interruptions, Biggs asks four times during the interview to be allowed to speak and explain his point, to which Holmes replies “stop grandstanding.” While time constraints might justify this approach, it would be especially frustrating for a renowned public speaker like Biggs who might be provoked to react by not being allowed to speak. Also, another factor that might account for Holmes’ aggressive and hostile approach may be the fact that just eight months previously Biggs, as Managing Director of the advertising firm representing Mitsubishi, had publicly censured Holmes and supported that company’s decision to revoke their \$1 million sponsorship of *Holmes* (“*More*”, 2003). Certainly, Holmes’ interview style with his other guest is markedly different. John Gow is given time to complete most of his statements and even elaborate on his ideas. In addition, Holmes employs a conversational style when speaking to Gow. On the other hand, Holmes, brusque and insistent, chastises Biggs for not answering questions. As a result, Gow appears calm, reasonable and at ease, while Biggs comes across as incoherent, fragmentary and evasive.

### **Narratives of Failure**

Holmes, operating as an investigative journalist, affects the persona of an outraged public watchdog uncovering wrongdoing and revealing the truth. As journalist and showman, Holmes presents dramatic narratives of failure, disorder and eccentricity, all characteristic of deviance, to identify a social problem but also to entertain his viewers and provoke a reaction. The familiar narrative with which Holmes introduces the interview segment evokes a common journalistic theme: organizational failure resulting in taxpayers’ exploitation (Protesse et al., 1991). Holmes poses a question about taxpayer spending (“should we, the taxpayers, be stumping up half a million dollars...?”) several times during the broadcast, but at no time questions whether New Zealand should be attending the Biennale. However, he always poses the issue of money in relation to the artist who was chosen, as Biggs points out, by a panel of “eminent people in the visual arts area” operating on behalf of Creative New Zealand. This panel included leading academics, curators, critics, directors and collectors, who selected et al.’s proposal for Venice from a number of applicants. Holmes’ question links the problem of taxpayers’ money with the idea of how that artist was chosen and key to this problem is the failure of the political organization, Creative New Zealand, and its procedures.

Holmes’ line of inquiry suggesting organizational failure recalls another journalistic narrative: suspicions concerning the honest, fair and effective administration of government programmes (Protesse et al., 1991). Panel members’ unwillingness to come forward implies something questionable may be going on behind the scenes. Transparency of government is an expectation in a democratic society, and suspicions are raised when members of a government body, even those who are casually attached to that organization, refuse to be held accountable. Biggs’ explanation that there was “a 45page proposal that won the selection criteria case” does not effectively clarify what was likely a complex decision-making process. The committee’s selection process is further challenged when Holmes asks, “You have committed to an artist, yes, without knowing yet what the work will be or will look like, is that true?” This question suggests that spending money on art that has not yet been made, but only described in a proposal, seems bizarre, somewhat unfair since it is common practice in business and politics to allocate money based on proposal submissions. What is being called into question here is the acceptability of the artists’ work in relation to what is considered “normal” art practice, an idea made even more significant with the frequent references to the artists’ installation *Rapture* (2004), which exemplifies their art. This work is never identified by its title but instead by its most

comic features: the port-a-loo and braying donkey. In fact, during the seven-minute interview, Holmes refers to the artwork as “the donkey” eleven times, with occasional mention of the “dunny”. This exaggeration makes the artwork absurd and calls into question the selection committee’s judgment and competence.

In this context, et al. seem not only unconventional but also unstable. Even though the artists prefer to be considered a group, the collective is a single person. In fact, Holmes reveals at the beginning of the interview that the collective is a woman called Merylyn Tweedie, but later insists that Biggs confirm et al.’s identity:

Holmes: Who is this et al., Mr Biggs?

Biggs: et al. is a collective, Paul...

Holmes: Well we know it's not. Stop right there, we know it's not a collective. We know it's this Merylyn Teedie... Tweedie.

Biggs’ attempt to maintain the anonymity of the collective’s identity adds to Holmes’ apparent confusion and sense of frustration. This mysterious and peculiar artist named Tweedie, who is one person but pretends to be many, resists public scrutiny and “refuses to comment or be photographed.” In short, et al. refuse to front up to journalists to take credit for and explain their work. Like the selection committee, et al. appear to be hiding something, and their spokesperson, Biggs, supports this dishonesty. Moreover, the artists’ multiple personalities and unconventional behaviour suggest they may be unstable. At first, Holmes presents the possibility that et al.’s eccentricities could be an advantage making them the “the right choice” and allowing them to fit in with the rest of the artists at the Venice Biennale, which, he points out, is “full of oddballs.” However, he later suggests, perhaps not completely seriously, that the artists’ instability makes them an unreliable choice, that they “might have a breakdown, the public pressure, the exposure, you know, there might be a complete collapse of the artistic flow.” As a result, et al. may not be able to complete the installation. Deviance and failure are linked in Holmes’ portrayal of the artists as secretive, unstable, unconventional, difficult and inaccessible. And the question remains: is this the appropriate choice to represent

New Zealand at a prestigious international event like the Venice Biennale?

## Conclusion

The story of Creative New Zealand’s selection of et al. to represent the country at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale was not news until journalists uncovered its deviant features. The best news is bad news, it seems. Reporting the event’s details in a negative light suddenly turned a relatively ordinary arts story, judging by the coverage of previous Biennales, into a dramatic controversy. The *Holmes* show presented this art event as a current affairs debate of interest to the general public, and Gow applauded the value of “debating which artist is going to the Venice Biennale”, despite the obviously imbalanced presentation of the topic. Televised debates often create only an appearance of discussion, and the format’s commercial constraints may actually result in a distortion of the issues. Turning social controversy into entertainment makes it engaging, accessible and memorable but creates the danger of overly reducing underlying complexities to simple polarities of conflict between good and evil. When difficult and challenging artists are considered in commercially-mediatised spaces, these artists are likely to be represented as curiosities and their artworks dismissed. Becker (2002), commenting on controversial artists, points out that they typically “refuse the de-politicized talk-show mentality, which gives the illusion of a public realm but in fact focuses on the personal, emotional, and psychological...” (p. 17).

The effects of the mediatised debate on the artistic merits of et al. extended beyond that evening’s broadcast as the issues raised on *Holmes* were magnified through intermedia repetition. Et al. even included the images from the broadcast in their next work, *restricted access* (2004) created for the Walters Prize competition. While Holmes’ outrage is entertaining, its danger lies in its consequences and the impact that the outrage, imprinted on the memory of the public and the press, has on the selection of artists to represent New Zealand at future Venice Biennales. As long as the newsworthiness of art is framed in the journalistic conventions of negativity and deviance, a vibrant and well-considered art critical debate will be unlikely.

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