

# Arts Review

## On the Couch with Dr Edward Colless

August 10, 2020 - [On the Couch](#)



### ***Who is Dr Edward Colless?***

When not travelling incognito or hidden under pseudonyms, he is editor of *Art+Australia*, senior lecturer in Art at the Victorian College of the Arts, and writer-at-large. He's also worked in diverse professional fields: architecture, film, theatre, curating, travel journalism. Call that indecision if you like. Or a cover up. He doesn't feel comfortable describing himself.

### ***What would you do differently from what you do now?***

In an interview with the British talk show host Michael Parkinson, Ringo Starr was asked what he would have done differently from being in the Beatles. He laconically answered, "I'd be a drummer." Like Ringo, I'd say "I'd be a writer". To stretch the simile, I guess my band is the crew at the VCA and at *Art+Australia*, and I've been privileged to drum for the latter for the past five years, helming this venerable journal (which has, apart from a few dry dock spells, been around since 1916) into new adventures.

I've themed each issue around the stormy weather that art and that Australia have both experienced throughout those years. *Extraterritoriality*: the refugee crisis and border panic. *The Plague*: the scenarios of pandemic and extinction. *Brutalism*: populist demagogues and culture war. *Outside*: escaping the neoliberal complexion and vector of the art market. I think of this journal as a journey. It will be risky. Don't look back to that safe harbour. Be spurred on by the drama of the moment, the upheaval of our time. What would I do differently on this voyage? Install a warp drive.

### ***Who inspires you and why?***

Against a world that now mostly inspires dread and doom, Katherine Bouman is positively

inspirational. She is the unassuming but eloquent young PhD candidate who devised the algorithm for the Event Horizon Telescope last year. Her invention interlaces the immense data arrays that fashioned the image of the black hole in the galaxy M87. This image itself is inspirational too, and not just because it's the spooky haloed radiance of cosmic cataclysm in an unimaginably distant reach of deep space and time.

There is as much art in its fabrication as there is science, and as much speculation as there is empiricism. That black hole is 55 million light years away from us, which means that this image of it is 55 million years old; but it's uncanny that this image has appeared at the moment we face the tipping points of climate change and viral pandemic, crises that are fueled by bellicose populist contempt for scientific knowledge. The image of the black hole and its event horizon is momentous enough for me to have turned the latest issue of *Art+Australia* toward it.

The *Event Horizon* issue, due out in August, assembles artists, writers, critics and philosophers who dare to stare at that catastrophic horizon. We'll also explore the significance of this image at a conference to launch the journal, through Melbourne University's Centre of Visual Art, with science writer Margaret Wertheim as a keynote speaker alongside a coven of astronomers, physicists, writers and artists.

***What would you do to make a difference in the world?***

I'll take a cue from Martin Creed's work, *The whole world + the work = the whole world*. The artwork of Creed's in this case is simply that formula written as a neon sign, like an advertising logo that advertises nothing but itself as a drop in the ocean. It hardly changes the world, at least a world saturated with contemporary art of which is an example – and which is a tag that ultimately only defines the frictionless, globalized commerce of an art market that can equivalently incorporate anything, even a piece of paper screwed up by Martin Creed sent through the mail or the tattoo on a living man's back (the tattoo and the man both in the collection of Tasmania's MoNA). Let's take Creed's word on this: no matter how politically charged it might be, contemporary art is a homeopathic therapy for a financial fever. How do we make a difference in this contemporary world? Heresy. Apostasy. I'll start by being "uncontemporary".

***Favourite holiday destination and why?***

In the current second wave of the pandemic and its global lockdown, picturing a favorite holiday destination sounds like an indulgence in pornography. And pornography is the relentless return to the scene of desire. Here's my scenery, at least picturing it inside my Covid bunker. I was fortunate to be in Iceland just before the pandemic began closing international borders, although I was on the last plane to arrive there during a hurricane that closed all flights in and out for days. Out in the open (and there's a lot of it across Iceland) the winter blizzards often reduced visibility to less than a few centimetres, but the weather could suddenly clear to reveal, above five-metre high snow drifts, neon auroral arcs streaming and pulsing across the black night sky.

In Reykjavik there is a ramshackle museum that tracks the meteoric flare of Icelandic punk music in the late 1970s. It's housed – although bunkered is a better word – in an old underground public toilet. None of the three ex-punk caretakers of this ragged, raw and crowded collection of ephemera actually know who started it or who owns it. They are like mad monks guarding an ancient reliquary. Up in a remote and tiny village in the north of the island I came across a gallery in someone's home dedicated to the "hidden people": daunting idols and talismans and trinkets evoking (or invoking) Icelandic eldritch, elves, goblins, trolls – which more than a few Icelanders say are real, not mythic.

These found or roughly crafted folk monstrosities swarmed like an infestation throughout that weird house and over the bare rocky hills around it. Its doors were open to the odd traveller like myself, but the owner never seemed to be home. Perhaps they were one of the hidden people. In

that bleak setting, it felt spooky and dangerous. Like the punk museum, it was an exhilarating and exemplary encounter with art.

***When friends come to town, what attraction would you take them to, and why?***

Near where I live in inner Melbourne there's a decaying and unkempt terrace house, the dark windows of which are covered with stacks of timber and metal sheeting, boarding up the outside and, where you can just see through, also piled like hoarded junk on the inside. Layers of barbed wire and a bizarre makeshift array of countless security cameras (or what are meant to look like cameras) attached to lintels, eaves and window frames suggest the occupant is as much a survivalist hermit as they are a chronic hoarder.

The place looks as if daylight and air never enter, and it's hard to imagine how anyone inside might exit. There is such an exquisite mystery to this black spot and such a dark pathology. Like Miss Havisham's decaying wedding party in *Great Expectations*? The critic Mark Fisher might have called the aura around this terrace "gothic flatline". In William Gibson's cyberpunk, a "flatline" is a minimal AI entity – the Read Only Memory of an uploaded but dead consciousness.

***What are you currently reading?***

My taste is as promiscuous as it is voracious, and looking across the piles of books beside the bed, on the sofa, or perched precariously on bookshelf ledges, it's hard to find a focus. But for sheer volume, I'm consuming scores of books on ruins. Ruins in art history, literature, philosophy, cinema, tourism, biography. Perhaps that's because I'll be teaching a course at the VCA on the aesthetics of decay. But perhaps it symptomatic of pathological condition arising from quarantine.

***What are you currently listening to?***

The silence in the otherwise busy street outside, interrupted only by the occasional shuffling of a lone neighbour in surgical mask nervously out for a walk.

***Happiness is?***

Encountering that item in a flea market on the outskirts of a foreign city in a strange country that you know no-one else will value but which you know you cannot leave behind.

***What does the future hold for you?***

Beyond Covid: finding a flea market on the outskirts of a foreign city. And finding everything else in that foreign city.

Edward is the editor of [Art+Australia](#) – which celebrates its 5th Anniversary of ownership and management by the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) at the University of Melbourne – with the launch of *Art+Australia* Issue #56.2 and the [Event Horizon Symposium](#): taking place virtually on 17 & 18 August, with two live plenary sessions on Friday 21 August via Zoom.

**Image:** Dr Edward Colless (supplied)

<http://artsreview.com.au/on-the-couch-with-dr-edward-colless/>