

# Peter Schjeldahl: The critic as squid

At one point in the pleasantly orchestrated conversation that was ‘An evening with “The New Yorker”’, for the Melbourne Writers Festival, the art critic Peter Schjeldahl was likened to a large smoking squid. This reference to an outdated bad habit, and the old-school independence that one associates with art criticism in this age of institutional connections that pass as independent speech, had him up there with fantastic voyages to the South Seas to locate the elusive home of the giant squid. By way of reflection on the Antipodes, where such sightings might still be possible, Schjeldahl and his fellow New Yorkers—Henry Finder, David Grann, Sasha Frere-Jones and cartoonist Roz Chast—talked gallantly about a variety of themes. In my mind, there is no doubt that the island of long rambling essays in print about all and sundry are over unless you are the institution that is *The New Yorker*. With its quaint 1950s ambience and deservedly celebrated cartoons it is deliciously nostalgic, a form of guilty pleasure, like reading a Patricia Highsmith novel.

The giant squid came into its own for some more targeted critique in ‘The art game’, compered by ABC Radio National’s Michael Cathcart and featuring the recently anointed NGV director, Tony Ellwood. In this company, Schjeldahl shon as the bright light of free thinking on the fatal shore of institutional imperatives. Cathcart took the art versus sport line to frame the discussion around a series of ‘rounds’ about ‘art as a game’ or (with more arch implications) ‘art as a racket’, dwelling somewhat cynically on the comparison with combative sport, and relentless fixations on the score, time and money. And Ellwood, for whom I had more sympathy—promising at least to do something for post-1950s international art in the NGV collection—was also cautiously hamstrung by the need to stand up in defence of the realm (bolstered by comments about audience numbers and accessibility) in terms of celebrating our great national identity (most specifically, as Melburnian). By comparison, Schjeldahl, in a delightfully gentlemanly tone (over the course of the evening), said with glorious frankness, ‘I hate biennales’, ‘I hate museums’, ‘I hate all ideas of art as a form of civic virtue’, ‘I don’t have anything to say about the art market’, ‘I would go seek out a Rembrandt with flashlight in a subway toilet if that is where it is shown’. Beauty and high-

mindedness, ‘You mean, like the moonrise over a Walmart parking lot?’ Phooey, and hooray for the aesthete, for the risk in the thing—the critic as the elephant in the room, alias ‘The squid’. Now there is a good idea for a cartoon ...

*The New Yorker* ‘bringing Manhattan to Melbourne’ was a theme of this year’s [Melbourne Writers Festival](#), 23 August — 2 September 2012.



Sasha Frere-Jones, Peter Schjeldahl, David Grann, Roz Chast and Henry Finder, ‘An evening with “The New Yorker”’, Melbourne Writers Festival, Melbourne Town Hall, 24 August 2012



Michael Cathcart, Peter Schjeldahl and Tony Ellwood, ‘The art game’, Melbourne Writers Festival, BMW Edge, 24 August 2012