

Sandy roadshow heads west

Perth's compact but refined sculpture showcase blows the unwieldy Bondi extravaganza out of the water.

VISUAL ARTS JOHN McDONALD

Sculpture by the Sea
Cottesloe Beach, Western Australia, until March 23
Tom Bass (1916-2010)

THE Australia Council revealed the startling statistic last week that "over 16 million Australians are actively participating in the arts". Its recent survey found that 22 per cent of the population is engaged in making art or craft while 900,000 people are writing poems.

At this point, you may be wondering why our public sphere does not show much evidence of this avalanche of art. With such huge public support and participation rates, it seems incomprehensible that every art institution can be crying out for funds. On these statistics, lavish funding for the arts would be a certain vote winner, while books of poetry should be topping the bestseller lists.

It is truly touching to find the chief executive officer of the Australia Council, Kathy Keele, telling us: "This research will help our arts organisations understand their audiences better and help make what they do even more welcoming and accessible."

Yes, just imagine any arts organisation planning next year's schedule on the basis of these figures. Imagine a publisher preparing a huge list of new poetry titles. Those who went bust on this basis might consider suing the Australia Council, although I'd be very surprised if any established arts organisation is going to take this dazzling new research seriously. Matters may be put in perspective when we understand that "participation" includes sewing, woodwork, "art photography" and -

believe it or not - reading. The report stops just short of including watching TV as a meaningful arts activity.

The great problem with a made-to-order statistical miracle is that it gives politicians the soothing impression that all is well with the arts, with no pressing problems that need addressing. This function of pleasing our political masters is, alas, a large part of what the Australia Council does nowadays. I would be very surprised if attendances at art galleries have done anything but fall over the past year or two. The internet, which the Australia Council sees as making viewers more "confident" about walking into an exhibition, is more likely keeping them at home, glued to the glowing screen.

The deplorable state of public sculpture in Sydney is one sign of the true state of our attitudes towards the arts. Many of the works on display in public places were donated, with councils always happy to get something for nothing. Even today,

there is no planning requirement for developers to spend a certain percentage of a budget on art. With no such pre-

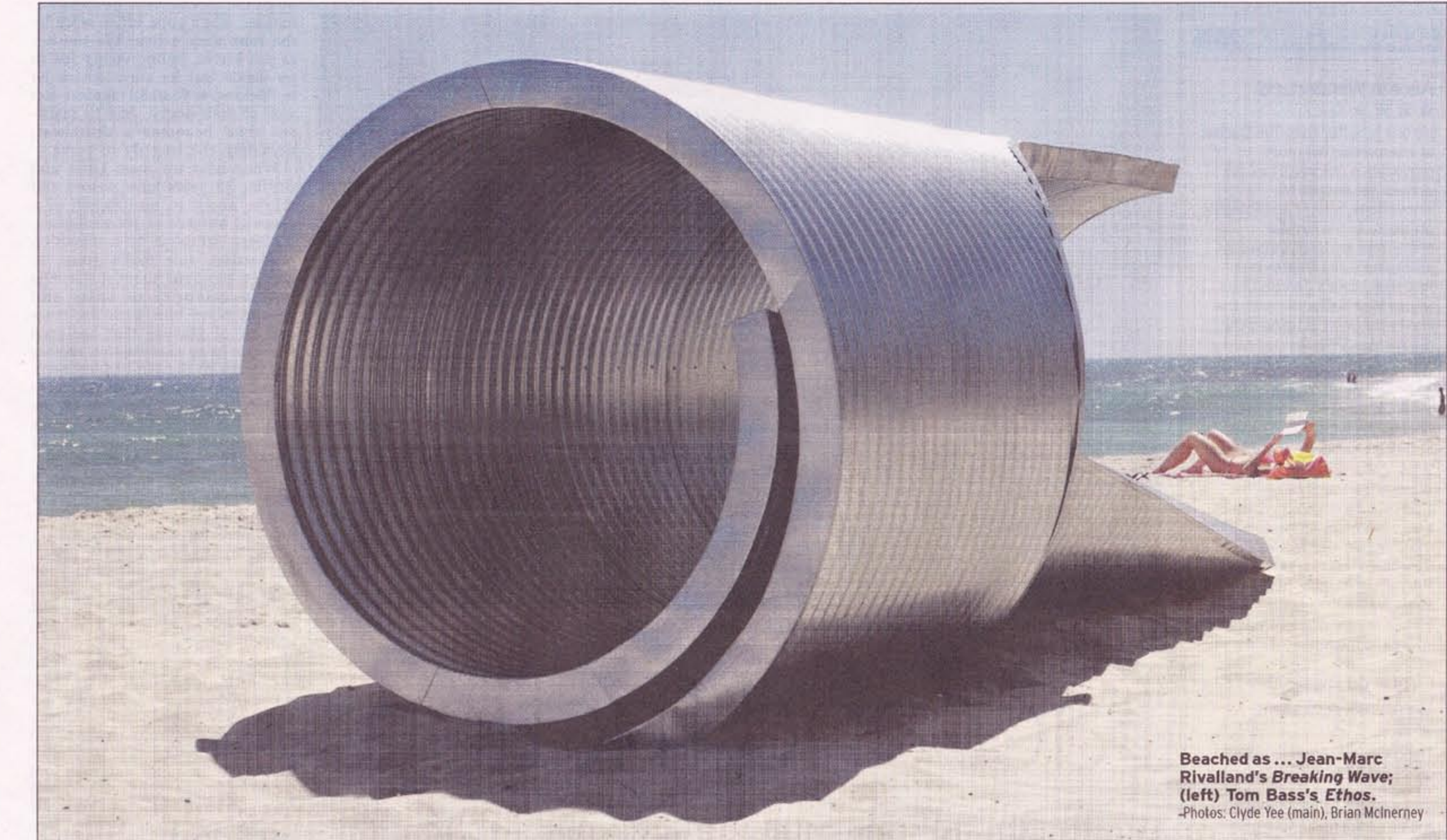
requisite, only a friendly suggestion, the vast majority will try to get away with the cheapest, tackiest option.

One artist who cannot be held accountable for the neglect of public art is Tom Bass, who died last month aged 93. For many years he was the only Australian sculptor who understood the importance of bringing art to the widest possible audience. Although we tend to view many of his surviving works from the 1950s and '60s as period pieces, they were conceived as far more challenging propositions. With every major commission, Bass aimed to push the boundaries of public taste, giving his audience a lesson in the visual language of modernism.

Not only did this lead to battles with commissioners, planners and audiences, it entailed formal and technical challenges of a high order. Bass's dominant role in public sculpture in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra was testament to his perseverance and sense of purpose. His figure *Ethos* (1959-61) became one of the symbols of Canberra and, by extension, the wider Australian community. His massive *Lintel Sculpture* (1967-68) for the National Library of Australia is even more impressive, spanning some 21 metres and representing the great weight of knowledge contained by that institution. This is partly an illusion, since the work is a relief.

In Sydney, one thinks of the wall sculpture *Research* (1956-59), rescued from the ruins of the old ICI building and relocated to Circular Quay on the pathway to the Opera House. More famous, or notorious, is the P&O wall fountain (1963), forever known as "the urinal" after a mischievous send-up on the cover of *Oz* magazine. Lest we forget, this much-maligned sculpture is also one of the few genuinely innovative works ever installed in the streets of Sydney.

In his later years, Bass became



Beached as ... Jean-Marc Rivalland's *Breaking Wave*; (left) Tom Bass's *Ethos*.
-Photos: Clyde Yee (main), Brian McInerney

an inspirational teacher of sculpture, whose students speak of him with reverence. The most surprising aspect of his long and distinguished career is his almost complete neglect by public art institutions. Within about two decades, his reputation underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. Initially a maker of radical, controversial sculptures, he was suddenly viewed as a throwback to those glory days of modernism passing rapidly into history. Few Australian artists have suffered such an abrupt and palpably unfair transition from the centre to the periphery.

Bass deserves our respect for his idealism and his unflagging efforts to drag local public sculpture into the 20th century. One suspects he will be judged more favourably by history than he was in his own lifetime.

One of the few public art events that gave exposure to Bass's later work was *Sculpture by the Sea*, which has generated audiences for art more effectively than any other Australian exhibition. With recent stagings in Bondi, Aarhus in Denmark and

Cottesloe Beach in Perth, it is hardly appropriate to see *Sculpture by the Sea* as an exhibition. It is a vast travelling roadshow, a complex logistical feat and guaranteed crowd-pleaser.

I had the chance to see the Cottesloe Beach exhibition for the first time last week. It is a more compact affair than the shows in Bondi or Denmark, featuring a reprise of a few favourite works, along with new pieces by *Sculpture by the Sea* regulars and a strong group of Western Australian artists. The Cottesloe show, in its sixth year, is about half the size of the Bondi event, and all the better for it. Whereas Bondi was a disappointment in 2009 - an anti-climax after the successes at Aarhus - the current show marks a return to form. Too many of the Bondi works were duds, dragging the entire show down into the ditch of mediocrity. In Cottesloe, the opposite applies. This time the poor works are in a minority and can be cheerfully ignored.

The Perth show has a very distinct progression, leading from a flag installation by the Argentinian artist Alejandro Propatos,

which looks a hundred times more dramatic than it did at Bondi, to Greg Johns's monumental *Horizon* figure standing in majestic solitude at the end of a long, rocky breakwater. In between, there are some undeniable highlights, notably Keizo

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Ushio's *Oushi Zokei*, a sinuous, vertical sculpture made from polished black granite. This is a departure from Ushio's usual circular forms, with vague echoes of Brancusi's *The Kiss* and Matisse's series of bronze backs. What is most impressive is the way the piece suggests a torso

but also two separate yet interconnected figures. It is a miraculous combination of two in one, inside with outside.

Another standout work is Koichi Ishino's *Wind Stone - Earth and Sky*, a fastidiously crafted combination of granite and stainless steel: a play of sharp angles and reflections, in which viewers are confronted with vivid fragments of the sky, the landscape and themselves.

A local work that attracted a lot of favourable comment was Jean-Marc Rivalland's *Breaking Wave*, a broken cylinder of gleaming corrugated iron lying on the sand near the shoreline. From one end, a spiral conjures up the movement of a wave unfurling into the tube shape familiar to board riders. The iron itself is reminiscent of so many buildings in the Australian bush and suburbs. It looks as if the piece has been snapped off some larger structure and washed ashore. The only drawback is that Rivalland has made the underlying armature from plywood, which will deteriorate if the work is exposed to the elements for any length of

time. It means that a sculpture that looks completely at home out of doors really needs to remain under cover.

Some might argue that the gradual deterioration of a work of art is a natural process and need not be feared. This is certainly the case for a piece called *Huddle* by Elizabeth Riley, which features a group of figures made from interwoven grapevines. The fragile nature of the group is part of its charm.

This is an exception to the usual rule. More than most art forms, sculpture expresses a deep-seated desire for longevity. This is certainly the case with Uchida's granite carvings and some of the other more substantial pieces. The works will endure long after their creators have disappeared. Such pieces embody a dream of immortality, tangible monuments to an artist's vision and talents. For no matter how much is written about a sculptor - whether his name be Ushio, Rivalland or Bass - it is only when we stand in front of the work itself that we know instinctively what it's all about.