

## **PYGMALION: ALEX SETON**

Noelle Faulkner

*“Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.”*

– *Aesop*

One of the quietest places in the southern hemisphere is in Sydney. It is an anechoic chamber located inside the Australian Hearing Hub, part of Macquarie University’s research centre for linguistics, audiology and cognitive sciences, among others. Inside the chamber of silence, one can imagine what space feels like—unnerving, eerie, cold, confusing. Here, the loudest thing in the room is your consciousness.

In the centre, sits a dome constructed of 41 speakers designed to isolate noise. The sounds range in frequency, music or a real-life scenario, such as the clanging of forks, clinking of glassware or chatter from a packed dining room. You could be sitting here, swallowed by the babbling of your thoughts one minute, and a barrage of 41 voices will be talking at you the next.

One particular study undertaken at the facility looks at how the brain senses space and recognises a sound’s direction. Without spatial awareness, one has difficulty focusing on a single conversation or blocking out the background noise. People who suffer hidden hearing loss, as it’s referred to, often report exhaustion. The condition doesn’t appear on audiograms. However, the exhaustion impacts those who have no trouble hearing but, rather, struggle to listen.

Hidden hearing loss may as well be a condition of modern life. As well as an auditory pathology: we want to hear everything, and therefore we end up listening to nothing. We shout and tweet and thumb our way through notifications and doom until we grow numb.

It was around four years ago when the discourse seemed to start to move faster than it could be grasped. We glued ourselves to it all. Fascism was rising. Truth was dead. Fake news was alive. Satire was murky. The planet was screaming. History was diluted. All lives Did. Not. Matter. And you had to pick a side. Conversations became unanchored; common ground, a no man’s land. Dare you not play musical chairs or invoke the neutrality of Switzerland. *“Silence is compliance, you know.”* It was around this time that Alex Seton made *Pygmalion*, commentary sculpted in stone shown at Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney. The work is named after a self-fulfilling prophecy, a sort of ‘if you build it, they will come’. The ‘Pygmalion effect’ is the phenomenon where higher expectations lead to an increase in performance. The inverse is referred to as the ‘Golem effect’. *Pygmalion* has itself become prophesizing, as four years after Seton’s exhibition, like a dal segno of events, an alarm set to snooze, the dialogue is repeating itself. (Just in case you weren’t paying attention the first time.)

An icon of consumerism, the Model No.14 chair or ‘Bistro Chair’, designed by German-Austrian Michael Thonet in the mid-19th century, was the first piece of furniture to be mass manufactured and a gateway drug to the flatpack boom we devour today. It is the most famous chair design in the world, found in restaurants from Tangier to Toorak. Even Le Corbusier, a pioneer of modern architecture, gave it his highest approval. “Never was a better and more elegant design and a more precisely crafted and practical item created.” he mused, probably while leaning into the No.14’s Bentwood frame at a café near his home in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. This chair, or twelve of them, held court in Alex Seton’s *Pygmalion*.

A symbol of the casual tête-à-tête, in its natural habitat, the bistro chair chatters away. Seton’s, however, bordered a phantom table. Without the domestic setting of a centrepiece, the formation becomes a face-off, a battle. The No.14 chair is not a soldier, it’s not even wartime-developed, unlike its rival, the metal Emeco Navy Chair. Among the hierarchy of design, it would be unbecoming for a No.14 to get involved in the matters of politics, beyond, you know, ‘just making conversation’. Some appear injured. Seton has healed them with prosthetic Statuario marble limbs. His *Bentwood Hybrids* stand undeterred by their wounds.

To gaze at *Pygmalion* with 2020 vision is also to be haunted. If the work was not time stamped, it could easily be passed off as new. Seton, who usually centres in on a single piercing note, here composes a symphony. It is a soundtrack to the chaos of the time, and in retrospect, a warning. In 2016, the world was hypnotised by the grotesque play of the then-present. It was the year of Trump, Brexit, the Panama Papers, the Zika virus, Europe’s refugee crisis, the horror of Aleppo and the US

election interference by Russia and Cambridge Analytica. It was when the Black Lives Matter movement went global and creepy clowns stalked the streets. And it was the year the world lost David Bowie, Prince, Muhammad Ali, Gene Wilder, Leonard Cohen, Carrie Fisher and George Michael. *Pygmalion* is Seton shaking us awake to bear witness to the first year we began to feel numb.

On two of the bistro chairs are a pair of skulls, representing the Pygmalion and Golem effects in white and black marble respectively, the latter with a pendulum hung above it. A Guy Fawkes mask—the calling card of anarchist hacking collective Anonymous—is lying face-up with a megaphone placed underneath the chair, from which the ‘Classic Bell Tower’ iPhone sound rings out on repeat. This is a reminder of the shouting you may have tuned out from. Entitled *Whatever it is, I’m against it*, the mask nods to the 1932 Marx Brothers film *Horse Feathers*, essentially the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century slang equivalent of ‘fake news’. We see a ‘Keep Sydney Open’ political shirt, which gleams differently under the haze of the pandemic; and a marble hardhat that stares across the room at a deathly-white marble tree branch clawing at the sky. A broken pylon, similar to those of ancient Rome, is also in attendance.

Facing the skulls is a marble cow based off on a novelty inflatable sex toy, which appears cute and cuddly, though lifeless and hard. Entitled *‘there’s no accounting for taste’*, this piece is a reference to the Wellerism which concludes, “said the old woman as she kissed the cow”. It could be a retort, a shrug, a judgement or a surrender. Maybe it’s all of the above?

Each row is flanked by a flag stuck in a marble traffic cone (*Hazards of success and Hazards of failure*), there is one black flag (warning) and one white (surrender). They lean awkwardly, as if placed as an after-thought, not due to concern, but requirement. Like a flippant disclaimer, they warn of a slippery surface ahead as if to say: *“Thank you for agreeing to our terms and conditions.”*

When the news cycle flashes at lightspeed via optic fibre, there is no time to check our blindspot. When opinion is shouted with such clamour, clocking its origin is near-impossible. When horror is siphoned and binge-fed to us through every backlit orifice, there is no time to digest the gluttony. Years pass, the noise rages on and we still struggle to listen. Most of all, as the unearthing of this four-year-old exhibition seems to have demonstrated, we struggle to learn. It begs the question: with the benefit of hindsight, would things really be different?

*Pygmalion* speaks to the chaos of the present via a dialogue of the past. It might appear as if all is in order, silent in stone. But listen closer: each unyielding effigy sat on a chair, is shouting into space in unison.