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EXTRAWORLD WAR I  
ANNIVERSARY LIFTOUT

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## Steel yourselves for an art attack

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**T**here are people in the world – otherwise sensible people – who continue to think the purpose of public art is to make people happy.

This is demonstrably untrue. In fact, it is the reverse of true; the purest pleasure excited by a newly announced work of public art is invariably to be found in the breast of the person who cannot stand it.

Take Sydney, which has been yelling at itself all week over Lord Mayor Clover Moore's announcement she plans to install a 50-metre undulating arch of stainless-steel fettuccine right over the road outside Town Hall. (This is part of the City of Sydney's cunning attempt to be more like Melbourne, while not losing face; an entire laneway in the city centre has already been festooned with empty birdcages and so far, so good.)

Three works of art have been commissioned, costing a total of \$9 million; the arch, a giant, blue milk crate, and a deeply shocking work from British badass Tracey Emin, the principal shock being that it involves 60 lovely little bronze bird sculptures and no bodily fluids whatsoever.

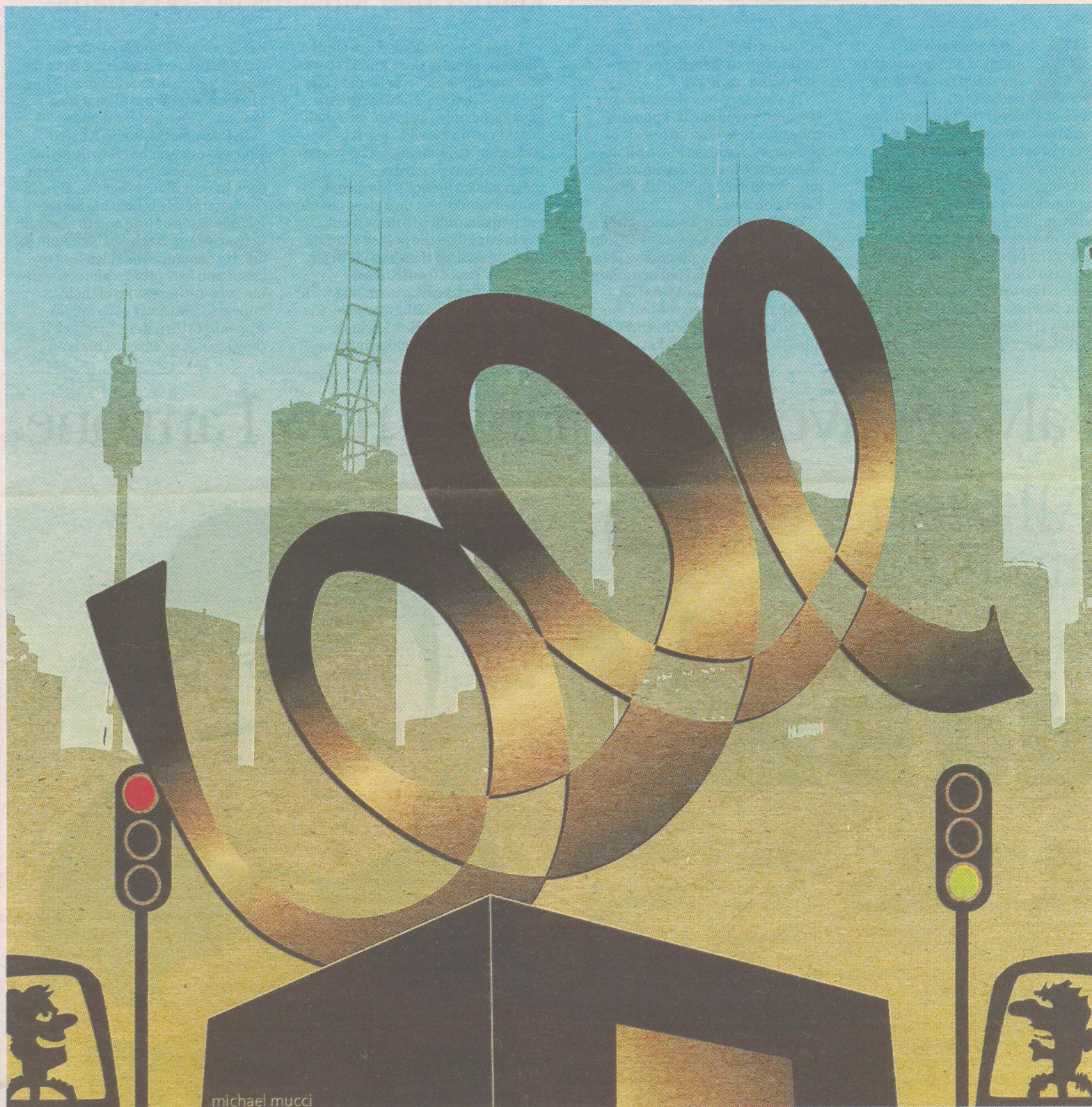
By about 2.10pm on Monday, easily \$9 million worth of fun had been had, by social media users cutting and pasting pictures of things the "Cloud Arch" reminded them of (Jessica Rabbit, the Stay-Puft marshmallow monster from *Ghostbusters*, dental floss, used tissues, deflated condoms, though the last two might have been Emin), or huffing and puffing along a variety of lines.

Right-wingers moaned about the whole thing being a waste of money, ugly, useless and getting in the way of cars. Left-wingers whined about how they should really be planting trees instead of steel things, and how offensive it was to even be discussing such things, given what's going on in Gaza.

To a shock jock or tabloid editor, the combination of local government body plus large expenditure plus giant artwork is an almost orgasmic one, rivalled only by hero cats, or public schools who ban Christmas decorations out of deference to Muslim students.

And the stimulatory effect to the cash-strapped Sydney media industry was immediately apparent; editors, their pupils dilated and their brains flooded with dopamine, cleared the front page and alerted the Photoshop specialists. Radio producers whistled on the way to work. "Clover's blown nine mill on a giant franger! Open the lines!"

When Robyn Archer, as part of her Canberra centenary celebrations, commissioned *Skywhale* – the dreamy, 10-breasted



michael mucci

cetacean hot-air balloon – enough hot air was generated in delicious outrage to keep the artwork aloft for 100 years.

Melbourne's Federation Square may have cost three times its original estimate, but gosh it solved the whole "run-out-of-things-to-talk-about" problem.

The witty denunciation of an expensive work of public art or design upon which your own taxpayer dollars have been squandered... is there any act more richly, aggrievedly pleasurable?

This is the thing that people often miss about public artworks; the ones that bring together people who hate them are exactly as successful as the ones everybody loves.

And the outcry itself forms a rippling, messy and thoroughly

**'Clover's blown  
nine mill on a  
giant franger!'**

enjoyable comet-trail behind the beleaguered creation, often saying more about the population than the artwork itself.

In Sydney, the sculptor Ken Unsworth, most famous for his beautiful river rocks suspended on wires, completed a work for permanent exhibit at Kings Cross in 1998. He called the ambitious collection of silver poles – to which adhered half a dozen enormous spherical brown rocks – *Stones Against the Sky*. Locals called it "Poo on Sticks", and have done ever since.

I'm not much for the sculpture, but the nickname is so funny it's worth it.

The British businessman Charles Saatchi, who was famous for advertising and buying up outrageous British art before he became famous for being mean to Nigella Lawson, filled a gallery in London with pickled wildlife by Damien Hirst, Emin's grotty sheets and various other opinion-inducing works.

Next to Hirst's tiger shark in formaldehyde, which is called *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, the Saatchi gallery exhibited a selection of the cartoons, indignant editorials and withering reviews inspired by British art's most infamous rollmop.

The cartoon I liked best depicted a businessman and an Eskimo standing in front of the tank and

gazing at the shark. Finally the Eskimo says "Hmph. My five-year-old kid could've done that!"

I hope while Clover Moore's Space Noodle is under construction (a process we can confidently assume will be simultaneously longer and more expensive than planned, and seasoned with nourishing little misadventures along the way such as can only really be experienced if you are a 50-metre steel structure attempting to get settled in right at the epicentre of Australia's biggest traffic jam) there will be a display on-site of the funniest responses.

I think the sculpture is beautiful – simple and complicated at the same time, and a perfect match for Sydney's sky. But if I hated it, I'd still be having fun.

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