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**FURTHERMORE
ALAN ATTWOOD**

House-painting and the pursuit of happiness

The timing has not been ideal. Last year's Melbourne Festival was held in the shadow of September 11. This year's festival officially opened last week while shockwaves were still spreading from the Bali bombings. It raises an intriguing question: at moments like these, does a festival become irrelevant or perhaps more important than ever?

General manager Mary-Ellen King says she was warned early on that something always happened around festival time: an election, lousy weather, a big event elsewhere. And while she suspects some people have opted to stay at home over the past week, "there are many who've decided to go out and be with other people".

Contemporary art has a way of reflecting what's going on, she says. This certainly seemed to be true on the festival's first day. It happened that the

opening event, featuring children coming down the Yarra on barges, came just after a Bali memorial service at St Paul's. The different happenings merged in Federation Square. King recalls "a sense of peacefulness and connectedness — the most wonderful antidote to fear and distrust".

There's been a lot of that. The news lately has been overwhelmingly grim, which makes the festival's visual arts program offering *A History of Happiness* seem especially compelling. It is free, which is one reason to be happy. Another is that it is being staged at the new Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Southbank — a fascinating building with beautiful, rusted, exterior walls that will make reluctant house-painters particularly cheerful. (See what can happen when you ignore the primer?)

If happiness is one theme of this exhibi-

tion, house-painting is another. A video work by Peter Land called *Step Ladder Blues* features grainy black-and-white footage of a painter in white overalls repeatedly tumbling off a ladder. This is accompanied by some stirring classical music that seemed naggingly familiar, although I couldn't place it. So when a friendly young woman wandered by wearing a badge saying, "Ask me about the art", I cheated and asked about the music. This stumped her. I pursued inquiries: It's Wagner, although I'm still trying to find out which bit.

Near the ladder video is an installation by Yoko Ono (yes, that one) consisting of three piles of river rocks. One is labelled "Mound of Sorrow"; another is "Mound of Joy"; the last one has no label at all. It could be a mound of happiness, or perhaps just a mound of river rocks.

Yoko has another exhibit here: a small

silver piece called *A Box of Smile*. There doesn't seem to be anything inside this neatly constructed box. Perhaps the smile is invisible; perhaps you're meant to smile on seeing it — wondering, perhaps, what the Beatles might have made of this had Yoko brought it along to a recording session.

In an adjacent room is a work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Officially, this is called *Untitled*; unofficially, it's called *Fortune Cookie Corner*. That's exactly what it is: a heaped pile of fortune cookies. The young woman with the badge passed by again and said I should feel free to take a cookie. I did.

The aphorism tucked inside mine was: "Innocence and time, once lost, can never be regained." Hmm. The happiness came later. I still had the cookie when I got home. The dog got it. He looked very pleased with himself. Festive, even.