

Ian Burn: COLLECTED WRITINGS 1966–1993, a presentation of the new book and other documents, organised by Robert Milne, 13 April–27, 2024, BOOKS at COLUMBUSPLEIN 233, 1057 TX Amsterdam, booksat.net

WALL

Ian Burn
Critical Methodology, 1989
lithograph
55 × 42 cm
edition 11/35
Collection 1856/Nicholas Tammens

Critical Methodology is one of the very few works Burn produced in the 1980s, editions such as these were made as fundraisers for trade unions. This piece picks up from the themes of his earlier text pieces and writing from the 1960s and 70s, albeit with an amount of self-criticism (with reference to his own language work and Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting*).¹

VITRINE

(top to bottom, left to right)

All documentation courtesy the Estate of Ian Burn and Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane, © Estate of Ian Burn. Page numbers refer to *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993*, 2024.

1.
Mirror Line, 1967–68

Two small mirrors placed either end of a small room and adjusted to reflect each other.²

2.
Four Sheets of Glass and Three Sheets of Acetate, 1968
glass, acetate sheets
60 × 40 cm

3.
Transaction sheet for
Undeclared Glasses, 1967 (detail)
(see pp. 77–81)

A case enacted by giving a person an arbitrary or set number of sheets of ordinary glass. The conditions being that the recipient receives no information which will indicate a possible classification or status of the glasses... [In order to] place all responsibility with the recipient for the decision whether what he is receiving is a work of art... it's necessary to withhold the (artists) intentions... But it's not enough to assume that, so as not to indicate the intention, one simply "does nothing". What is indicated must be formulated with great care...³ I once gave Mel Ramsden nine sheets of glass and he used them to frame his own works.⁴

4–5.
Mirror Piece, 1967
thirteen sheets of printed paper, glass and mirror in wooden frame paper sheets: each 27.5 × 21.3 cm; glass: 52.7 × 37.6 cm
edition of 35
(see pp. 83–99)

I certify that I consider this work is in no way unique and might be reproduced at any time or place by myself or any other person (either acting on my behalf or acting independently). This work which is titled *Mirror Piece* and dated 1967 was manufactured and complies to specifications set out by myself.⁵

6.
Ian Burn at his desk in Finsbury Park flat, London, 1966. Behind him are *Re-ordered Painting No. 2*, 1965; *Yellow Blue Equivalence*, 1965–66; and a postcard of Frank Stella's *Bampur*, 1965
(see pp. 83–99)

In that first year away Burn felt at times that his past amounted to 'more or less a state of nothingness'. Faced with the weight of European cosmopolitan culture, he painted prolifically at night making eight series of increasingly minimal canvases. His day job was in a pictureframing workshop.⁶

7.
Four Sheets of Glass and Three Sheets of Acetate, 1968
glass, acetate sheets
60 × 40 cm

8.
Acetate/Mylar Mirror Piece (detail), 1967
silver mylar and clear acetate
4 units, each 61 × 92 cm

9.
Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects, ghost-curated by Ian Burn and Joseph Kosuth for Donald Karshan, New York Cultural Center, 10 April–25 August, 1970
(see pp. 18, 75, 121, 129, 689)

The hanging of that exhibition coincided with a strike over a new contract in the framing factory and the artist recalled: 'I found myself making token appearances at the picket line and then dashing over to the museum to oversee the installation.'⁷

10.
Systematically Altered Photograph: The Suburbs, 1968
photogravure and photocopy on paper (image from 'Australian Panorama', Australian News and Information Bureau, c. 1967)
150 × 120 cm
edition of 25
(see pp. 101–06, 578, 670, 675)

Imagery was reintroduced in ways which deliberately exposed its problematic status. In the *Systematically Altered Photographs*, the image was photocopied, then the copy copied and so on, for about a dozen times. The altered image was then juxtaposed with the original, with the readings drawing attention arbitrarily to certain features and details. The original image was cut from a magazine. There was no sense of creating the image, only of recreating it within a new system. The source was a promotional publication put out for overseas consumption by the Australian government... The clichéd character of the images was important.⁸

11.
Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden
The Grammarian, 1970
artist book, 12 pages
each 28 × 21.8 cm
edition of 50
(see pp. 128, 137–46, 163)

12.
Acetate/Mylar Mirror Piece (detail), 1967
silver mylar and clear acetate
4 units, each 61 × 92 cm

13.
Ian Burn and P. Rea
'Value Added' Landscape No. 11, 1993
oil and ink on board, transparent synthetic polymer resin,
59 × 87 × 10.5 cm
courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
(see pp. 44–47, 621, 639–46, 649, 678–81, 698–702, 740–41)

These works are collaborations. The paintings were purchased in second-hand markets or junk shops; each picture was then combined with a text which, at alternate moments, describes the picture, addresses the viewer and reflects on itself as text. This collaboration between image and text advances a 'collaboration' between artists. The dialogical form is fundamental to the work, despite my collaborator being an unknowing, perhaps unwilling, participant in the process. If a picture is signed or the painter's name otherwise indicated, then he or she has been acknowledged as co-author of the current work. I like to think that one day someone will walk into an art gallery and recognise his or her painting... and approve of the outcome of the collaboration. (I also hope the artist recognises that the reinflexion of his or her painting is no more than that which occurs through normal institutional practices of curators, critics, art historians and dealers).⁹

14.
Xerox Book No. 1, 1968
book: 103 photocopied pages,
each 21.2 × 27.6 cm
series of 12
(see pp. 126–27, 578, 612)

With commercial processes, the artist's physical activity is becoming integral with the machine... There are no decisions the artist can make during the process which are relevant to the making or the product... Working with commercial processes implies the possibility of anyone doing it at any time, even "originally"... The only difference in my doing it to anyone else's is the way of thinking about it and this is all I can really lay claim to.¹⁰

15.
Ian Burn shaving in *1–6 Glass/Mirror Piece*, 1967
(see pp. 83–99, 578–80, 582)

For example, with *Mirror Piece*, you were left with endless questions about what you were looking at, and why you might be bothering to look at all. They were made deliberately to be as much like ordinary bathroom mirrors as possible — bland and ordinary. The way we look at them is also meant to be ordinary. When there's not much to look at we become more conscious of the structure of our perceptual experiences and of the 'theory-ladenness' of those experiences and we become conscious of being forced to make a range of decisions about the work, which can make us more aware of the 'language'd' conditions of our seeing.¹¹

16.
Referential Line (six sheets of tracing paper) (detail), 1967–68
black and white photographs

17.
Ian Burn photographing a *Mirror Piece* in his New York studio, 1967
(see pp. 83–99, 578–80, 582)

When I first showed the *Mirror Pieces* in Melbourne in 1968, a well-known critic dismissed them as 'instant self-portraits'—but he was more right than he realized. I'm always fascinated to see how people photograph the *Mirror Pieces* in particular —because they have no fixed appearance but when you photograph them you freeze an image onto the mirror. When I first photographed them they came out like little Vermeer interiors. When the NGV photographed them for *The Field* catalogue in 1968, they did it to reflect the architecture, so the mirrors look just like formalist or constructivist paintings. The photographer has to make the decisions, and the look of the work is determined almost entirely by the photographer's own aesthetics or ideas of what the work should look like.¹²

18.
Working Art: A Survey of Art in the Australian Labour Movement in the 1980s, curated by Ian Burn, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1985
(see pp. 295, 331–45, 672, 674)

Consider, then, the contradiction between working all day with fifty year-old manufacturing equipment and then driving home in last year's Mazda, cooking dinner in a microwave oven and watching a hi-tech American fantasy on a home video. Or spending all day staring at a VDU screen and then going home to relax watching a television screen. Or the pleasure of watching a Star Wars movie while facing technologically enforced redundancy. These are the complex experiences of working life at the end of the twentieth century.¹³

19.
Ian Burn's study, Sydney, October 1993, photographed by John Marmaras the weekend after Burn drowned trying to rescue his daughter Rebecca and other children while on a family holiday at Petty Beach, Bawley Point, NSW

These rooms are full of unfinished business—newly purchased amateur paintings stacked between neat piles of books and files, notes in a briefcase. The walls chart the extremes he juggled between the circumstances of regional origins and the ideals and demands of Conceptual Art. Eight small works are hung on the wall surrounding the door. They become visible only when you swivel around from the facing desk —which was where you would find him if you walked in unannounced. In the center above the door an accomplished late-nineteenth-century amateur landscape by his grandfather keeps company with one of his figurative studies from his first year at art school in 1961.¹⁴

20.
Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden *Soft-Tape*, 1966
installation with tape recorder and wall text
(see pp. 14, 17, 57–73, 126, 563–64, 582)

21.
Ian Burn in his New York studio, 1967. Behind him is *Blue Premiss, No. 2*, 1966–67, three *Blue Reflex* paintings, and two *Mirror Piece* works
(see pp. 606, 666, 669)

22.
Diagram for 'Word-Painting' (detail), 1967, framed photocopy, 44.4 x 44.3 cm

23.
Ian Burn photographing *Blue Reflex*, 1966–67, with *Yellow Blue Equivalence*, 1965–66, reflected behind him in his New York studio, 1967
(see pp. 491, 571–82)

The surface looks like the duco on a new car.¹⁵

24.
Ian Burn's New York loft with two *Blue Reflex* paintings, 1966–67
(see pp. 491, 571–82)

BOOKSHELF

- Working Art: A Survey of Art in the Australian Labour Movement in the 1980s*, curated by Ian Burn. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985.
- Ian Burn, *The Necessity of Australian Art*, with Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether, and Ann Stephen. Sydney: Power Publications, 1988.
- Ian Burn, *National Life & Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900–1940*. Sydney: Bay Books, 1990.
- Ian Burn, *Dialogue: Writings in Art History*, edited by Geoffrey Batchen. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991.
- Situation-Identities: An interview with Ian Burn in West*, vol. 3, no. 2. Nepean: University of Western Sydney, 1991.
- Ian Burn: Minimal–Conceptual Work 1965–1970*. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1992.
- Ian Burn: Art: Critical, Political*, edited by Sandy Kirby. Sydney: University of Western Sydney, 1996.
- Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, edited by Ann Stephen. Sydney: Power Publications; Melbourne: Monash University Gallery, 1996.
- On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn*, edited by Ann Stephen. Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2006.
- Union Media Services, *Art & Working Life slide-kit*, edited by Nicholas Tammens. Melbourne: 1856, 2018.
- Australian Journal of Art*, vol. 12, no. 1: In Memoriam: Ian Burn, 1994.
- Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993*, edited by Ann Stephen. Sydney: Power Publications Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2024.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Tammens, *Critical Methodology*, work note in *EVERYTHING IS FINE*, curated by 1856, exhibition pamphlet, Paris Internationale, 2019, p. 8.
2. Ian Burn, *Mirror Line*, work note in Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, *Collected Works*, New York, 1971, pp. 9.
3. Burn, *Undeclared Glasses*, 1967.
4. Burn, excerpt from 'Interview by Joel Fisher' in *Ian Burn: Minimal–Conceptual Work 1965–1970*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1992, p. 75.
5. Burn, *Mirror Piece*, 1967.
6. Ann Stephen, 'Ian Burn's Peripheral Vision', in *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993*, Power Publications, Sydney; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Köln, 2024, p. 14.
7. Helen Grace, 'So I joined the Teamsters', in *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, Power Publications; Sydney, 1996, p. 55.
8. Burn, talk, Melbourne 1988.
9. Burn, Notes on 'Value Added' Landscapes, 1993.
10. Burn, notes, 1968–69.
11. Burn, 'Blue Reflex', notes for a talk at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, May 1991 in *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993*, 2024, p. 580.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 578.
13. Ian Burn and Sandy Kirby, 'Artists in the Labour Movement', in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, pp. 147–48.
14. Ann Stephen, 'Dialogue', in *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn*, Melbourne University Publishing, 2006, p. 3.
15. Burn, 'Blue Reflex', notes, 1991.

Thanks to Tom Melick, Naomi Riddle, Matt Hinkley, Nicholas Tammens, Isabelle Sully, Maud Vervenne, Marni Williams, Lachlan Thompson, Milani Gallery, Ann Stephen, Avril Burn and the Estate of Ian Burn.