

SITUATION-IDENTITIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH IAN BURN
by Geoffrey Batchen and Helen Grace, 1991

Ian Burn has been an influential Australian artist, writer and art activist since the mid-sixties. After serving an apprenticeship in carpentry and joinery from 1956 to 1960, he attended the National Gallery School of Art in Melbourne for two years, studying with Alan Sumner and then John Brack. He worked briefly with Fred Williams as a picture framer before heading overseas in late 1964, living in England until 1967 and then in New York until 1977. During this period he was a prominent participant in the Conceptual Art movement, exhibiting individually, collaboratively (with Mel Ramsden) and collectively (as Art & Language) throughout Europe and North America. His work was also included in *The Field* exhibition in 1968 at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. After returning to Australia in 1977, Burn taught for a time at the Power Institute, University of Sydney, and since 1981 has worked as a journalist and graphic artist with Union Media Services in Sydney. He has published regularly since 1969 and in recent years has become an important commentator on Australian art and its history. Two books by Burn are being published this year, *National Life & Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900–1940* (Bay Books) and *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Allen & Unwin). In 1992 the Art Gallery of Western Australia is mounting and touring a survey exhibition titled *Ian Burn: Minimal–Conceptual Work 1965–1970*. The following interview was written during August and September 1991.

Geoffrey Batchen: Ian, we appear to be in the midst of a massive re-writing of the history of Conceptual Art. In 1988, *Flash Art* published a special issue on Conceptual Art featuring a series of reminiscences by Conceptual artists. In 1989 the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris mounted a large historical exhibition titled *L'art conceptuel, une perspective* which emphasised an American orientation to the movement. The 1990 Biennale of Sydney included an idiosyncratic survey of Conceptual Art, its precedents and offspring. More recently we have seen the publication of Charles Harrison's *Essays on Art & Language*, a book which provides a peculiarly English perspective on the issues involved. Your work was included in all these projects and has also been featured in recent commercial exhibitions in Europe devoted to works from the Conceptual period. Why is Conceptual Art being revived now, some twenty years after its initial appearance?

Ian Burn: After the market for Conceptual Art lapsed about the mid seventies, much of the work sat around dealers' stockrooms, studios, backsheds etc. When I returned to Australia in 1977 there was not much interest in work I brought with me. By the late 80s, however, Conceptual Art could again be marketed and re-presented as 'history', while also serving to advance other professional careers in the visual arts industry. The market operates on many fronts, intellectual attention and commercial interest go hand in hand. Impinging on that, however, is the fact that issues raised by Conceptual Art and Minimal Art (as well as Pop Art) haven't gone away as some people hoped. Questions about the nature of objects and commodities, the protocols of display, the displacement of style, uniqueness, second order practices, the role of theory, encroaching institutions and so on, have kept nagging at a new generation of artists.

GB: In your own statement in *Flash Art* you concluded with a few critical remarks about the role of art history:

The period is being rewritten as 'history' in ways which overlook key elements of the critical space achieved by conceptual art at that moment. It is self-serving, in the interests of the very institutionality against which the art was reacting. It's history suppressing politics, which I don't like very much.

Could you comment in more detail on the implications of the present historicisation (and accompanying marketing) of Conceptual Art?

IB: Market attention allows a partial recovery (of ideas etc) but also influences the values in terms of which that recovery occurs. The political (and cultural) conservatism of recent times, for example, suggests that current historicising will also be conservative. That's certainly the case. The rewriting of the history of Conceptual Art is being mediated by the complex agencies of American art, and by American chauvinism generally. A particular brand of Conceptual Art is being stressed above others, privileging certain New York based work. Underlying the new packaging is an old-fashioned American world-view (which, after the obscenities of the Gulf War, is now being touted as a 'new world order'). This 'Americanising' of Conceptual Art contradicts the more democratic impulses invoked by the art.

But I wouldn't suggest the original packaging of Conceptual Art was any more honest or authentic. Despite much of the art being conceived in the first instance as already 'history', the institutional packaging still happened before anyone was quite prepared for it. So the first 'history' was sorted out through opportunism and sheer careerism on the part of some of the artists. Conceptual Art had a very productive 'underground' life from about 1966 to 1969, a period when virtually no-one was interested in exhibiting the work (and the artists didn't really know it was 'Conceptual Art'). It rapidly developed public profile during 1969–71, when it was defined by museum shows largely in advance of being taken up by commercial galleries. By 1972 Conceptual Art was wrapped up by the market and art institutions: leading players were labelled and possible (critical) strategies were circumscribed by the public form. A wide range of endeavours became reified within a single 'style', estranged from those creating the work—and gestures of resistance to this institutionalisation were mere gestures, as marketable as the most flagrant acquiescence. This provoked a crisis for many artists. Within Art & Language at that time we reacted variously—some wanted to withdraw from exhibiting altogether, some decided to withdraw from art altogether, some decided to produce work which was incomprehensible in market terms (but then comprehensibility never has been a respected market value). Later, other options were canvassed, including different ways of intervening in the institution of art history.

GB: Speaking from that history, what are your views on recent art in Australia which appear to repeat concerns, aspirations and strategies employed by artists like yourself in the 1960s. What strikes me about this repetition is that it appears in many cases to be blissfully ignorant of its predecessors. I'm thinking here of the work of artists like Debra Dawes, Robert MacPherson, Jacky Redgate, Lindy Lee, Janet Burchill, Jennifer McCamley, and so on...

IB: There are many ways of knowing something. Art historical sensibilities are embedded in any artistic practice, and works of art convey historical understandings unlike those generated as part of a formal or institutional discourse. These different notions of history rarely coincide and more frequently end up in conflict. So—if you can say an artistic practice is informed by certain ideas, can you also say the artists are ignorant of the history of those ideas?

GB: But one assumes that twenty years of history between your work in the 1960s and the work of these recent artists has made a difference. What might that difference be and how does it impact on the potential of contemporary 'conceptual art' to produce the critical space you want to claim for the '60s variety?

IB: During the 60s the criticality of a practice was set against the mounting institutionalisation of virtually every aspect of art. Sure, that critical space was utopian. And shot through with contradictions. Despite that—or maybe due to it—for a brief time a critical space seemed to be achievable, by working astutely around certain ‘edges’ of the institutions, drawing attention to those edges, without allowing yourself to become marginalised. Even if that was partly illusionary or a fiction, it did change a few things. But as institutional practices grew more canny, the edges became less visible and the institutional forms more pervasive, integrating with the economies of the object, dissipating the possibility of any critical space. Today, notions of criticality are defined by (and within) institutional discourses; the most you can hope for is to manufacture a little friction between institutional forms.

But this sort of historical comparison also needs to recognise that the institutional environment in Australia has disenfranchised certain historical understandings. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and for well into the 1980s, public collecting and academic histories were dominated by a taste for ‘dumb’ art and bureaucratically safe aesthetics, meandering between a reactionary formalism and a decorative expressionism. In other words, an avoidance of art which demanded any kind of intellectual engagement. (Where, for example, are the works by Mondrian in this country, despite his profound influence on so many artists here?)

Paradoxically, the work of artists like those you mentioned is now forcing our public collections to acknowledge concerns excluded by the orthodoxy about 60s Australian art. Some museums are trying (belatedly) to rectify this and to back collect Minimal and Conceptual works. It could be said then that, perhaps unintentionally, some recent art in this country is functioning critically in relation to our public institutions, drawing attention to the silences about certain ideas, certain kinds of art. This is a quite different notion of criticality—but then art is being made today under quite different conditions, in a vastly different art industry.

In this sense the recent *Perspecta* in Sydney can be interpreted as an indictment of the collecting policies and taste of the 1960s and 70s. Through the works and in the catalogue, there is a conscious invoking of Minimal and Conceptual Art—in other words, the references are to artists scarcely represented in public collections here, while there are no references to the sort of art which was collected then. It’s a familiar story—when French Impressionism and Post Impressionism was about, our galleries collected academic art; during the various modernist movements, they collected more academic art or academic versions of modernism; during American Abstract Expressionism, they got adventurous and collected School of Paris; and throughout the 60s and 70s, they propped up the formalist academy. Even today, some of our public galleries are still investing in a neo-expressionist academy.

Helen Grace: Given your involvement internationally with Conceptual Art, what influenced your decision to return to Australia in 1977? Why at that point did Australia appeal?

IB: Besides personal reasons, I had after ten years developed a fairly intense distaste for the machinations of the New York art world. Increasingly New York seemed an unnecessary constraint on where my interests were heading. In addition, while working within a group had in some ways insulated me from many of the New York art world pressures, the working relations within Art & Language had reached a fairly daft state of crisis, where the collective basis simply couldn’t go on in the way it had. There were heated disputes over what we were doing in New York and what the other part of Art & Language was doing in England, and then there were ongoing conflicts between those involved in New York, about the character of work and its direction, about what constituted ‘work’ and its most appropriate modes of dissemination; and Joseph Kosuth’s individual careerism

which traded off the Art & Language association merely intensified the general angst. Since the activities of Art & Language were by then fairly much part of the fabric of the New York scene (that is, it was becoming a commodity like any other in New York), the impasse meant I would have had to sort out a different relation to New York. By then, I guess I had little enthusiasm for that.

Also—as I became more involved in broader cultural politics, I found I had an intense feeling of alienation from American political culture, from what was (and is) politically possible there. By that time, a fairly scathing critique of centrist institutions and practices had been developed and taken about as far as it could in New York. The problem was that not only was New York dominating the international art scene, but it was in effect also monopolising the critique of itself, which effectively silenced the critiques from ‘outside’ New York. I know we’re all caught in contradictions in our lives—but, on a personal level, I suppose this particular contradiction had become intolerable. However, I was at a point of wanting to sort out a different relation to ‘Australia’. I was beginning to work through ideas around historical models of artistic development. Some of the ideas in the book just published on traditional landscape painting in Australia were first toyed with in New York and while teaching in San Diego and Halifax. Curiously, it was the detailed critique I wrote with Karl Beveridge (published in *The Fox*, no. 2, 1975) about Donald Judd’s Minimal Art and writings which effected a critical distancing and gave me the space to begin to work with some of those ideas.

HG: In much of your polemical writing during the seventies, there’s a strong critique of the idea of international art and the way in which this has come to mean, on the whole, American art...

IB: While the equation of ‘American’ with ‘international’ might seem to have abated, it’s still very influential through the PR surrounding American art. Only recently I was looking at Irving Sandler’s 1988 book *American Art of the 1960s*—more than 400 pages of it—which includes most well-known non-American artists but privileges American participants in every aspect of work. In this book, the melee of ideas and styles is suddenly nationalised, Americanised—other people’s ideas are subsumed and ‘American art’ becomes the all *inclusive* category for the sixties. Artists from other places are neatly slotted in as supporting players. Yes, American art was hegemonic during the 60s, but to reduce *everything* to that category distorts history even further.

It’s illuminating however to compare Sandler’s book to, say, Bernard Smith’s *Australian Painting 1788–1960*, including the recent Smith-plus-one edition. If a work wasn’t physically produced on Australian soil then it’s not really ‘Australian’ and can’t be talked about. Nor can the work produced by artists visiting Australia be talked about (except Christo’s work, which I’ve never been able to take seriously). Australian art is upheld as an *exclusive* category, not an inclusive one—and wilfully excluded is much which could help people understand the art. In contrast, William Moore’s earlier history treated Australian art in a far more inclusive fashion. It seems that the recasting of the history within a more dependent framework induces a more exclusive definition (and makes a mockery of the decision, 30 years on, to update and republish Smith’s book—a decision seemingly based on market factors, i.e. for the good of Oxford University Press, not for the good of Australian art). I find it perverse that—now in the 1990s—we’re still faced with the issue of why ‘Australian art’ remains so resolutely an exclusive category!

HG: But in your critique of internationalism, Greenberg becomes a particular figure for attack, even ridicule. To what extent was your criticism of Greenberg an issue brought back to Australia with you and to what extent were you responding

to the climate here in the mid-seventies in which Greenberg was still, in some quarters, a major figure? Retrospectively, do you see any continuities between your own early practice (e.g. in its ‘absolute abstraction’) and some of the principles which Greenberg espoused?

IB: Greenberg’s ideas were briefly attractive (particularly as they were filtered through the paintings of Louis and Noland) but he discounted most of the artists I found interesting. The work of artists like Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol etc was dismissed as ‘novelty art’ by Greenberg, but ironically many of the artists he supported have ended up as historical jokes. In the 1930s Greenberg wrote some acute stuff about kitsch and about collage, but the later dross about flatness, quality and the ‘objectivity’ of taste (*his* taste) wasn’t persuasive for very long. Michael Fried’s writing was of more interest, especially his close analysis of Frank Stella’s earlier work. The sort of art I was producing was more aligned with early Minimalism and was not abstraction in the sense of Greenberg’s Modernist paradigm. Minimalism was about animating ‘real’ space and ‘real’ time, and was regarded then as a new kind of ‘realism’—in fact, in 1968 the Museum of Modern Art in New York organised a show of mainly Minimalism which was titled ‘The Art of the Real’. Minimalism requires viewing in a different way—we may be fascinated by the spectacle (hi tech, abstract) of the surfaces, but our perception does not qualify the object in the way which happens with formalist art. Minimal Art leads to a subversion of abstraction, of non-representation... as evidenced in the development of Conceptual Art, especially in the way certain work incorporated representational imagery.

I hadn’t thought much about Greenberg for some years until I returned to Australia. I was surprised at the aspects of Greenberg still taken seriously. By the mid 60s there had been a fairly volatile split within what was then mainstream art, between the formalist academy (over which Greenberg held sway) and the Minimalist camp (which invoked a diverse range of artists like Duchamp, Reinhardt, Cage, Johns, Warhol, etc). The division was absolute, there was no way you could have a foot in each camp. But, in places away from the mainstream ‘centre’, artists often drew ideas from both sources, the influences seemingly undifferentiated. In Australia, bits of Minimalism seeped in but the stronger attraction was towards a Greenbergian formalism. The point about Minimalism was that it presupposed a particular stage of institutionalisation within the art industry (of museums and administration, curating and art history, publishing and criticism, etc). That was well advanced in New York by the early 60s, but in Australia it was then only in very early phase—in fact, the entrepreneurial role of museums in relation to contemporary art didn’t emerge until the late 60s and didn’t become ‘normal’ practice until the mid 70s. For instance, Mel Ramsden and I approached the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in the early seventies proposing a small survey show of our Conceptual work and the gallery wrote back saying that such shows were against its policy. But the point I’m making is that, in places like Australia, the institutional conditions didn’t exist then for a developed understanding or articulation of ideas within a Minimalist frame. I think Greenberg understood that and used the situation for some fairly blatant marketeering.

HG: Fred Orton wrote in 1983 that “Art & Language assumed from way back that the universalising claims were all out. The job was to address the contingent and to treat the production of art or a second-order discourse as contingent.” Do you think that your work in the last fifteen years might be seen as a continuation of some of the Art & Language concerns (e.g. the point about contingency) although the direction that you have taken has been markedly different from that chosen by others of Art & Language (particularly Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden & Terry Atkinson)?

IB: What you call the concerns of Art & Language were simply an extension of concerns of the individuals participating under the collective banner. I don’t have a sense of ‘corporatised’ concerns apart from that. I dragged a whole bunch of ideas and cultural baggage with me into A&L, which were jostled around and changed in that context; then I dragged out those and a lot of other ideas when I came back to Australia. I have a strong sense of the continuity and evolution of those ideas and the contingency of those concerns.

GB: I’ve always been struck by the way it is possible to locate your work within an artistic lineage peculiar to Melbourne. Your persistent concern with perception and notions of picture making seems, for example, to continue the interests of earlier artists like Fred Williams, John Brack, Sidney Nolan and Max Meldrum, and through them the academic training methods at the National Gallery School. Meldrum is a particularly interesting precedent in this regard, with his abstracted tonal pictures and his emphasis on a close phenomenological analysis of what is seen. I know you acquired a copy of Meldrum’s 1950 book *The Science of Appearances* quite early and even built one of the optical apparatuses that he recommended. Indeed, there is a superficial similarity between your 1968 series of *Systematically Altered Photographs* and Meldrum’s Chromatic Analysis diagrams from this book. However it is Meldrum’s obsessive formalism that seems a strong precedent for your own art practice. Could you comment on this, and to what extent you have consciously worked through the art of your Melbourne peers?

IB: Meldrum’s ‘obsessive formalism’? I would have said that Meldrum analysed perception into basic formal characteristics, in order to create an optical illusion of objects in space on a two dimensional surface—which is not really how I think of formalism. But, yes, I’ve found much of interest in Meldrum’s ideas—especially his conceptualisation of the practice of painting, as well as his consistent political stance. The ideas, the conceptualisation the detachment, his strategies to suspend or delay recognition of objects, the exercises relating to perception and the quirky practical apparatus he proposed, have all ended up as part of my cultural baggage though I never actually produced paintings like Meldrum. I was attracted to Meldrum’s ideas before I went to art school, where he was scorned by everyone—but later on bits kept returning, in the oddest ways, occasionally giving my art a quite specific (ironic?) reference but also forcing a different appreciation of Meldrum’s ideas.

That, if you like, is how contingency works... it’s the point where (in my development) Meldrum stumbles into Minimalism. Meldrum had a highly pragmatic rationalist approach, which he pursued to a point of irrationality, giving the ideas a different kind of interest. That rationalism has parallels with some American art of the 1920s and 30s, which also provided a reference for some Minimalist work. But a stronger connection was with Meldrum’s emphasis on perception and its ‘scientific’ analysis, a particular kind of perception. The vision he was talking about was phenomenologically based. In the mid 60s, when my art as concerned largely with the perceptual experience and how that might be made more self-conscious and reflexive—and I was reading bits of Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and others on phenomenology—some of Meldrum’s ideas didn’t seem all that out of place. The work of art wasn’t regarded as a thing-in-itself, but was what it appeared in the experience of the viewer. Meldrum said he wasn’t teaching people to paint but teaching them to see, and this was based on an ‘everyday’ sort of seeing. Minimalism and Conceptual Art, in fact from Jasper Johns on, was based on very ‘ordinary’ kinds of perception and an ability to analyse those experiences in a detached

manner. We can see this aspect of Meldrum's art extended through the work of Fred Williams who had studied with William Dargie, a follower of Meldrum. Williams' landscapes of the 60s don't just have a Minimalist 'look' but also tend to operate visually in such terms. It may be just coincidental but now, when a number of artists are exploring ideas through Minimalist and Conceptualist frames, we are also beginning to see a rehabilitation of Meldrum.

More generally though, I wasn't deliberately working through an Australian background, it was always something which was simply there. But it was also something I didn't want to suppress. With hindsight, it strikes me it was quite useful baggage... the phenomenological orientation of Meldrum's perception and conceptualisation of the practice of painting, the potency of irony as a practical methodology which I liked in Nolan's early work, the irony and conceptual detachment of Brack, the phenomenological vision and surfaces of Williams, and 30 on. This formed part of my resources (along with Léger, Mondrian, Johns, Reinhardt, Stella, etc) and was continuous with the Conceptual work I was producing. At the same time, those Australian references were something I had to try to make sense of in relation to the work I was then doing, because none of the conceptual frameworks available to me could account for that sort of contingency. Certainly the existing art historical models weren't any use. This probably explains in part why 'Australia' kept re-entering my work during thirteen years working in London and New York: it was there not as some exotic antipodean subject matter, but as the only way I had then of trying out certain (theoretical) relationships.

The question of how we understand (and write about) the art produced in Australia is the same question of how we position Australian art in an international context. Historically, works of art have embodied far more sophisticated answers than those which have come out of academia. However, some of the the recent so-called post-colonial writing by people like Homi K. Bhabha propose theoretical tools better able to cope with the complexity of cultural responses and may be adapted to historical situations like that of Australia. These proposals open up other ways of discussing and analysing the attitudes and nuances around influences, relations of authority etc.

GB: Your writing over the past decade has consistently argued for the cultural specificity of Australian art, even for all that seemingly Americanised work shown in *The Field* exhibition in 1968. How do you view yourself in these terms? Mel Ramsden has written that during the '60s Ian Burn was "psychologically imprisoned behind his sense of his origins and cosmopolitanism". Ramsden could be thinking of one of the works you did together, *Soft-Tape* (1966) which was recently reconstructed for the 1990 Biennale of Sydney. You speak of this work in the Biennale catalogue as being about the "moment when geometry becomes fused (confused?) with geography". In same ways this could describe the interaction of viewer/listener and space/sound within the actual installation. But are you also speaking here of a distancing or spacing between the place of its conception (London) and the place of its intended exhibition (Melbourne)? In what ways is 'Australia' figured in *Soft-Tape*?

IB: It was important that *Soft-Tape* was conceived for exhibition in Melbourne and was about how to make a context of ideas explicit, even if not available. For me (it was slightly different for Mel), *Soft-Tape* attempted to give form to the problem of translation or transvaluation of ideas when communicated across a cultural distance. The rhetorical slippage between 'geometry' and 'geography' served as a metaphor for that problem—geometry invoking 'pure' concerns with space, which presume a *universal* reference, against geography which suggests the *specificity* of place.

If, as we were thinking about it then, communication is importantly a spatial problem, then that spatiality isn't abstract—in other words, the slippage between geometry and geography becomes a vital aspect of the meaning.

For both Mel and myself, it was an odd work to have conceived just at that point, prompted by our thinking about an exhibition in Australia. It represented an ontological shift in our practices, which led to a sort of epistemological rupture. As a work, it was fairly crude, even blunt, but in many ways it served as an archetype for a number of subsequent works and 'exhibitions'.

HG: In the important recent show *Off the Wall/In the Air: A Seventies Selection*, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, a collaborative work with Mel Ramsden, titled *Shouting Man*, was exhibited. The piece was first shown in 1975 at the Internationaler Kunstmarkt Köln (International Art Fair Cologne), so that a certain audience was presumed. In looking at the work, fifteen years later, there seems a continuity between its polemical concerns and the work which you have subsequently done in Union Media Services. It's as if the work quite specifically points in that direction. The 'shouting' which the man does might be seen to be directed in some sense towards the art world and, at the same time, it is almost as if the artists in this case are answering the shouting man's call from a place outside of that. However, the slogans still fall on deaf ears when shouted within the art community. If you remove the words, does the work lose any of its effect, ultimately? It seems at the moment that there is, for you and a number of others who have been working in different ways, a renewed interest in the art world, and yet a work like *Shouting Man* still suggests the ultimate impossibility of that engagement. Can you comment on this?

IB: For the section of this work shown in Cologne in 1975 we adopted a fairly aggressive (i.e. abusive) mode of address, about how "the New York art spectacle loves controversy, it buys controversy, it sells controversy... Shit, it's all masochistic, living in New York: we congratulate ourselves as 'moral', we raise our fists as 'rebels', we lament our conditions as 'workers' (for crying out loud), blue jeaned bodies, hammer in one hand, sickle in the other, clawing our fucking way to the top... Move away, never move here at all—you still drown in the international market, ripples of bloated culture, shit, it's all masochistic" and so on. This is language intended to corrode the institutionality of the New York art world, but confronting the reality that abuse may be the only weapon left.

The dealer exhibiting the work was a bit upset by the fairly desperate language and also the problems of translating the text, so we produced a more polite version which still ended up not being translated. This text was about "indexicality as a kind of anarchistic device busting up the hegemony of commodity language. If 'talk' is indexical —'unique' to a particular time and place—then we have a deliberate epistemological contradiction in respect to translation from one context to another [and so our 'talk'] is difficult to treat 'universally', to turn into an object of contemplation... Our language(ing) is tied to contradictions which are concretised in the asylum of group (A&L NY) indexicality, which is the only real space we've got—such contradictions should be pushed to the limits, more and more..." This text is more 'philosophical', yet—what happens when you *shout* rather than speak a text like that?

At that time we were experimenting with different modes (and tones) of speech. Other works, including a number of songs, also adopted the form of an harangue. The shouting posters were like a visual rendering of an harangue and, yes, any text could be used as the image invokes the tone of voice. That was intentional. The shouting of 'content' also becomes

the voiding of content, is about the impossibility of artists reclaiming 'direct speech', of speech which is not mediated, echoing the institutional frame. This was not about the loss of 'authenticity' becoming a topic or subject-matter of the art, but rather of the impossibility of authenticity in the first place. It's irony, but self-deprecating irony, when you've got nowhere else to go. This is a far cry from notions of the integrity of abstract painting as basis for an ethical future.

There was, about then, a utopian hope that one might be able to resolve certain contradictions politically, but of course there are just as many contradictions in political action, and just as many compromises. However, such politics influenced the form of this 'work, despite the irony of 'content'. The posters were made for single use, pasted directly onto the wall, as if the gallery was a street. We wanted something which left as little commercial residue as possible yet could exploit the high theatre of an international art fair. Of course, such actions have only a momentary effect since, ultimately, all transgressions of the commodity are accountable in terms of the 'logic' of the commodity.

HG: Since the late seventies, you have been actively involved in the Artworkers Union and since the early eighties you've been working in graphic design and media production for the trade union movement. You have also supported and assisted in the development of the Australia Council's Art & Working Life program, an extremely interesting set of practices which has perhaps attracted more media attention in Parliament than it has from the art world or from the union movement. The principles of the policy are of far-reaching significance in our considerations of culture in this country, although the practice itself as often been problematic. Why have you chosen to concentrate your own energies within the trade union movement in recent years?

IB: There are many ways of working as an artist. When I write I don't think of myself as an art historian or critic or journalist. There are also endless contexts in which to work. The 'political art' which evolved out of certain Conceptual Art always talked about the need to engage other audiences, but generally it was only ever talk. The Art & Working Life program has a particular interest, because it does actively engage with another audience... and the art produced with unions gets used in quite different ways. This work has particular strengths and limitations, but it gives you a critical perspective heightening awareness of the limitations of mainstream practices.

Like it or not, the arts are moving ever close to 'totally administered' industry and the tendency increasingly is to create an institutionalised enclave based around certain mainstream practices, inward looking and largely immune to 'outside' criticisms. Maybe this is inevitable in 'advanced' societies, it nonetheless should be resisted, vigorously. Everyone gains by having a diversity of artistic practices which are not dependent on the art museum and which are able to draw on and enrich each other.

HG: Art & Working Life seems to propose a rejection of both high cultural values, on the grounds of its elitism, and of mass culture on the grounds of its consumerist (and American) orientation. In its place, an authentic working-class culture seems to be proposed, one which also has a particular national character. Isn't this a romantic, almost nostalgic leaning towards a past which may never have existed?

IB: Well, I don't think anyone is really proposing an 'authentic working-class culture'. Admittedly bits of the promotional material may read that way and there's always a slight danger of the program becoming trapped in a dated rhetoric. But a lot of the work is new, it doesn't have a developed (critical)

vocabulary, it often doesn't have an effective dissemination, and it has met a considerable amount of resistance and suspicion from the art institutions as well as the union institutions. Yet any careful selection of work produced so far does show a remarkably strong body of work.

HG: But aren't there some useful qualities to be drawn from mass culture (or popular culture, as a number of critics would now prefer to call it)? In the disdain for certain aspects of mass or popular culture, is there not a trace of Greenberg's own distaste for popularisation? Notwithstanding the criticisms which might be made of the global ambitions of mass culture (criticisms which the art world still seems reluctant to make), isn't it the case that popular cultural forms, even if their source is, for example, the US, also lend themselves to particular local appropriations and transformations?

IB: That's the Schwarzenegger one hundred million dollar question... the point is that some popular cultural forms (like art styles) lend themselves to transformation, and some just don't. A problem is, though, when most artists talk about mass or popular culture, they implicitly mean American pop culture, and from at least several decades ago. Generally that which American Pop Art legitimised. The cultural and temporal distance seems to make it more pervasive and more powerful... as if there's an unacknowledged belief that the 1940s and 50s produced a more 'authentic' popular culture.

But the larger issue I think is that the old dichotomy of 'elite' and 'mass' is losing much of its value. In the first place, the theatricality of so much art today has increased its entertainment value, whether we like it or not, and for example well over a million people now visit the Art Gallery of NSW per year. The arts are also widely promoted as popular spectacle through all forms of mass media. On a practical level the distinction between elite and mass is dissolving—but the distinction can only dissolve because elite and mass are both abstract concepts of audiences. They are part of the ideological frame of production, projected into and through the work itself. In contrast, the dominant tensions or contradictions experienced by artists today emerge, I believe, more from the institutionality of the culture, and what if any space for practice exists outside the institutional forms. Can there be such a thing as a non-institutionalised practice? It's a serious question today whether art any longer exists in its own right, or whether it exists only as a fiction of the institutions. Is the 'art' in being an artist merely to invent work which convincingly extends that fiction? Has style become just a mask behind which the artist is allowed to grimace... which no-one can see?

Ultimately, this institutionality may be more invidious—and increasingly it's a fact of life. Artists are again being forced into new strategies. As the cultural products of different countries realign towards even greater conformity, the differences are increasingly expressed in the *silences* within cultures. But how do we read the silences? Of course, we should never be silent in the face of institutions, that's when we should be shouting—but we should also be listening carefully for what does become silent.

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