

FLATTENING AUSTRALIAN ART HISTORY?

BOB LINGARD

Sociologist, writer. Born Brisbane 1948.

PETER CRIPPS

Artist, Curator. Born Melbourne 1948.

'A work of art is created and exerts its influence in the medium of historical time; its success, or lack of it, depends just as much on the external circumstances of the moment as upon its inner aesthetic quality. It is saved from transitoriness not because of its supposed timelessness but as a result of its repeated involvement in the course of history, and it survives the day of its birth and rebirth as it moves out of the darkness of oblivion and misunderstanding into the light of a more or less short-lived memory.'

Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 72.

'What is history?' and 'what is art history?' – two elusive and intellectually engaging questions. Nevertheless they are important and prior questions in considering Australian art history. We would suggest that the history of Australian art is a 'flat history' because of the overwhelming emphasis on painting within that historical discourse and within the broader culture. Accepting the veracity of our assertion in relation to the 'received' or official accounts of Australian art history, one does then have to consider such historiographical questions in attempting to account for the seeming exclusion of non-painting in such accounts. Non-painting is used here to refer to a whole range of art practices, including installation, performance, sculpture and other three-dimensional work in much the same way as Rosalind Krauss defines contemporary sculpture as 'not landscape' and 'not architecture'.¹ These classifications, of course, bear witness to the blurring of distinctions between many contemporary art practices.

Clearly all historical writing involves what Raymond Williams has called a 'selective tradition', that is, the way in which one account is presented as 'the history'.² In Australian art history terms, some artists, some paintings are included in the usual, chronological, linear accounts of developments, others are excluded. In these general histories non-painting usually has no place, certainly it would seem to have no place in the perceptions of Australian art of the proverbial persons in the street.

Factors in addition to the selectivity of historical practice have also to be considered in accounting for the historical absence of non-painting. It might, however, be the case that when 'the history' of Australian art from the 1960s to the 1980s is written that non-painting will be granted more than a cameo role. It is the case that conceptual and minimalist non-painting practices of the sixties and seventies have impacted importantly upon the most significant post-conceptual painting being done in Australia today. The return to painting across the recent past, of course, might ensure no more than a cameo role for non-painting in any such history.

How does the present structure, the selectivity involved in the construction of the past? Markets, museum acquisition policies, documentation, criticism, the practice of history writing, amongst other things, all play their part. Non-painting is at a disadvantage here, often not being documented and thus not even available to historians in their selective ravaging of the past. This lack of documentation contributes to what Brian O'Doherty has called the 'radical forgetting' of much art practice and art history.³ To utilise E.H. Carr's approach in *What is History?*⁴: we have all the art which has been produced and of which there is some kind of record (the actual painting, say or the photographic documentation of a performance) and then finally the 'art historical facts' chosen from the latter by art historians to adumbrate their histories. Non-painting is at a disadvantage in these processes because of specific difficulties relating to documentation, which in turn limit the possibility of selection for the historian's account. The actual nature of much sculpture, much installation work (perhaps its site-specific or time-specific nature, for example) and the 'ephemeral' character of much performance create difficulties for documentation and thus for historical inclusion. A similar process occurs with one day shows. Further, newspaper criticism, which provides a ready primary documentation for the historian, does not usually deal with performance, one-day shows and the like. Criticism in general, as Abigail Solomon Godeau suggests⁵, is also important in mediating between 'the market place and the sanctified judgement seat that is the museum'. The judgement of the museum is important in the construction of an art history and as such the lack of criticism of much non-painting also militates against its historical inclusion. The non-gallery based nature of some recent non-painting also inhibits critical response.

The impact of art markets and the emphasis upon product have also restricted the inclusion of installation and other non-painting, practices in historical accounts. Products and markets have a symbiotic relationship and this interaction is intimately related to the acquisition practices of museums which in turn relate to the construction of art history, given the authority of the museum. Market and product emphases have encouraged the dominance of painting for the commercial gallery and for the private collector. Domestic space is obviously also a factor here. Market and product concerns can also subvert the intention of some art practices. Much conceptual and performance art of the late sixties/early seventies critiqued the 'art system' and its 'grandeur' and voraciousness, while simultaneously attempting to escape the effect of the commodity form. However, in some cases the documentation of such practices often became the commodity for sale, thus subverting the original intention. The Q Space + Q Space Annex 1980 + 1981 exhibition held at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (7 October – 25 October, 1986) documented a series of strategies utilised by John Nixon and others in Brisbane to re-orient contemporary art practice and the nature of exhibition spaces.⁶ This IMA exhibition and catalogue were obviously important in reducing the selectivity of local art history but this reduction was perhaps at a cost to the original intention of the Q Space + Q Space Annex project. As the conceptual work of the sixties gets further away from the present it seems certain that art market considerations will intervene to (possibly) co-opt the intention and context of the earlier practices. This might, however, have a positive impact in terms of historical accounts by keeping these 'art objects' alive, as it were. Brian O'Doherty has summed up the impact of the emphasis upon product in art history in this way:

The economic model in place for a hundred years in Europe and the Americas is product, filtered through galleries, offered to collectors and public institutions, written about in magazines partially supported by the galleries, and drifting towards the academic apparatus that stabilises 'history' – certifying, much as banks do, the holding of its major repository, the museum. History in art is, ultimately, worth money. Thus do we get not the art we deserve but the art we pay for.⁷

Non-painting does not fit easily within this model. The paradox in relation to non-painting is that much of it, installation for example, is suited more to museum display than for domestic (conspicuous?)

granting of the imprimatur of the museum.

The national and state galleries have a small number of installation works within their collections. Perhaps the curators of the Perspectives and Biennales at the Art Gallery of New South Wales have played a more enlightened and creative role in relation to installation than those in the other galleries. The Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council and government funded contemporary art spaces in existence since the Whitlam government period have also played an important role in supporting non-painting (particularly installation, video and performance work), a point to be returned to a little later. To return to the museum collections though: painting is the overwhelming emphasis of the historical accounts and specific readings of Australian art history provided by the collections of the national and state galleries. Such a 'flat' reading is reinforced by the particular historical exhibitions they curate. Of course installation work causes real storage problems for the already strained storage spaces of these galleries. Even when installation is collected by the museums the infrequency of their display almost ensures the death of the work. While a painting continues to exist when it is beyond the gaze there is a sense in which the installation is interred when it is not installed.

Reference was made earlier to the blurring of the distinctions within the various categories of non-painting. Such blurring of the boundaries has to some extent also occurred between painting and non-painting. It might be the case, though, that the much publicised return to painting has flattened out a lot of the diversity of practice of the recent past. Much contemporary non-painting is difficult to classify as sculpture, performance, theatre or whatever. Fritz Rahmann has written of the positive and creative effect of the 'namelessness' of particular non-painting practices. Thus he argues: 'Namelessness rests upon the condition that an object is not part of a system, and it is exactly this autonomy which makes the nameless object a vessel in which various meanings can be collected'.⁸ Such 'namelessness', a trait of much non-painting, places such work at a disadvantage though in relation to the acquisition policies of museums, sales and the construction of art history, for our world in Habermas' terms has become an 'administered' and 'scientised' one, almost eschewing the hermeneutic and intuitive.⁹ Art works almost require a name, a distinct category, to become part of the art system and its history. Some interesting and provocative non-painting evades such categorisation but does so at its own peril in historical terms. 'Out of the bureaucratisation of artworks arises the name, and generally speaking the myth of art becomes an object of administration'.¹⁰

Thus we arrive at the problem of historicism in the relay of art history – the tendency to link, often tenuously and inappropriately, art productions of the present with those from the past in a single line of development. Regarding this historicising process Rosalind Krauss has these pertinent comments to make:

Historicism works on the new and the different to diminish newness and mitigate difference. It makes a place for change in our experience by evoking the model of evolution, so that the man who now is can be accepted as being different from the child he once was, by simultaneously being seen – through the unseeable action of the telos – as the same. And we are comforted by this perception of sameness, this strategy for reducing anything foreign in either time or space, to what we already know and are.¹¹

In this sense a 'flat art history' begets a 'flat art history' while tending to exclude and construct non-painting as the other.

It seems patently clear that we are not looking at a peculiarly Australian problem regarding the flattening of art history. Certainly the best known icons of Australian art history are paintings, whether they be works by Roberts, Streeton, McCubbin and the like or the works of a later generation such as the Angry Penguins. Compare the public recognition of Sidney Nolan and his work with that of his contemporary, the sculptor Robert Klippel. In the 1950s American artist Barnett Newman said that 'sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting'¹² – obviously an attempt to define contemporary sculpture but also some indication of its standing vis-a-vis painting. There is a sense though in which we are considering a specifically or idiosyncratically Australian problem because of what Mike Parr has called the colonised nature of Australian art and art history and concomitantly the residual place of non-painting within that dependency.¹³ Parr argues that the pattern of change or development in Australian art has been 'in lock step with historically read and contextualised approaches pioneered and promoted by the major centres in Europe and America'.¹⁴ The elusive pursuit of the everchanging international styles tends to marginalise other practices here. Ian Burn is making a concomitant point when he talks of the two-faced nature of Australian art practice and the two-faced past of Australian art history. Thus for Burn, 'artists have required a familiarity with European art, but they have also needed an intimacy with the traditions of this country, however tenuous'.¹⁵ Australia's location as a semi-peripheral state in a dependent relationship within the world capitalist system affects Australia's internal economy and more relevantly affects cultural production and reception here, including the writing of art history. The eternal regionalism/internationalism debate within Australian culture reflects these broader economic/power relations of dependency. Of late, and related to the internationalisation of culture we have seen the construction of Australian art products, including contemporary Aboriginal art, as exotic and authentic juxtaposed against the inauthentic products of the 'fin de siècle' cultures of the centre. There are new dangers here, not the least of which is what Eric Michaels has called the 'ultra-consumerist' appetite for 'primitive provenances' which potentially may 'exhaust' the products themselves.¹⁶ Parr suggests that this situation has meant that 'the history of Australian painting is essentially a history of received authority'. Thus, in terms of form and content, he argues, correctly we would aver, that 'the hybrid nature of installation and conceptual, media-based approaches generally, was one that fundamentally contradicted the kind of convergences over-determining such painting'.¹⁷ The 1985 5/5 Funf vom Funten daadgalerie exhibition, including installations by Richard Dunn, John Lethbridge, Mike Parr, Peter Tyndall and Ken Unsworth and sponsored by the Visual Arts Board, is ready evidence of that point.

When a history of Australian art from the 1960s to the 1980s is written the contribution (from the 1970s) of the Visual Arts Board and the Contemporary Art Spaces will have to be given a prominent role. In a sense both have provided in different ways (within a bureaucratic framework to be sure) an alternative structure within the broader, more established art system and, as such, have operated to some extent in a non-colonised way. Non-painting has been encouraged and supported. The success of this alternative is evident when one looks at the career developments of a range of post-war Australian artists. Non-painting has also played an important part, sometimes unacknowledged, in these developments, both individually and collectively. In some ways (clearly not in all ways) the Sydney Biennale and artist exchanges have questioned the regionalism/internationalism conundrum. This European exhibition of site-specific work might well provide a prompt to the art historians regarding the place of non-painting in any history of Australian art which aspires to be anything other than narrowly and myopically selective. Exhibitions such as these are important for establishing an ongoing artistic dialogue for artists located both here and elsewhere. This sort of one-to-one artistic exchange is one between equals and as such is different from other exchanges in international art magazines and the like which often reflect centre/periphery power relations. (July 1988)

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of Mike Parr to the production of this essay.

Footnotes

1. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1986), p. 282. In our argument we are excluding craft from non-painting while being aware that the state and regional galleries have considerable collections of craft and decorative arts.
2. Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory' in Roger Dale et al. (eds.) *Schooling and Capitalism: A Sociological Reader* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 202-10. Across the recent past feminism, for example, has contributed to revisionist art historical accounts concerned to reduce the selectivity of art history.
3. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, The Lapis Press, new edition, 1986), p. 87.
4. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1961).
5. Abigail Solomon Godeau, 'Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-side Aesthetics' in *Screen*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Summer 1987, p. 2.
6. See *Q Space + Q Space Annex 1980 + 1981*, exhibition curated by Peter Cripps, IMA, Brisbane, 7 October - 25 October 1986 and catalogue which accompanied this exhibition.
7. O'Doherty, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
8. Fritz Rahmann, 'Difference to Realspace', a text originally published by the Kunsterhaus Bethanien for Büro Berlin's 'Emolape' project, under the title 'Die Differenz Zum Realraum', translated from the German by Graham Coulter-Smith. *Forthcoming Art and Text*, pp. 3-4.
9. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (London, Heinemann, 1974). On Habermas see Michael Pusey, *Jürgen Habermas* (London, Tavistock, 1987).
10. Rahmann, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
11. Rosalind E. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 277.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282.
13. Personal communication from Mike Parr to Peter Cripps, 10th June, 1988.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Ian Burn, 'Is Art History Any Use To Artists?' in *Art Network*, 15, Autumn 1985, p. 11.
16. Eric Michaels, *For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrula Makes TV at Yuendumu*, (Artspace, 1987), p. 14. Michaels is speaking specifically of contemporary Aboriginal art. The point has a broader generalisability. On the specific point, also see Colin Symes and Robert Lingard, 'From the Ethnographic to the Aesthetic' in Paul Foss (ed.) *Island in the Stream* (London, Pluto Press, 1988).
17. Mike Parr, *op. cit.*

E3

Curated by
CATHERINE ARTHUS-BERTRAND

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

September 3 to October 16, 1988

Kate Blacker, Jacqueline Dauriac, Raoul Marek,
Ernest T., Christos Tzivelos, Felice Varini

Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

September 9 to October 1, 1988

Dominique G. Foerster, Jean-Luc Vilmouth

Artspace, Sydney

September 29 to October 29, 1988

Felice Varini, Michel Verjux

Australia, for me, was kangaroos hopping around in wide open spaces... At least that was the image I had of it. Nevertheless it was here that the directors of three contemporary art spaces asked me to jointly guest curate a series of exhibitions.

E3 is the result of this invitation — a project which seems matched to the scale of the country itself because it takes place simultaneously in three different states: Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The nine participating artists each travelled to Australia to work for the exhibition. The pieces they present were made in and for the spaces they occupy.

E3 is the continuation of a close, ongoing collaboration between myself and this group of artists, all of whom, in different ways, incorporate an awareness of the space they occupy into the conception of their work.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Sally Couacaud, Sue Cramer and Richard Perram for the confidence they have shown in me, and, most particularly, Liz Stirling without whom this exhibition would never have been possible.

Catherine Arthus-Bertrand

Translation Jennifer Flay

Catherine Arthus-Bertrand

1954 Born in Paris, France.
Independent curator living in Paris.

Curated Exhibitions

- 1985 *6h avant l'été*, Blacker, Bourget, Leccia, Varini, Tzivelos
A VOIR, Windows on White, NY : Tzivelos, Varini
1986 *ici Rome... à vous Paris*, Rome : Friedmann, Leccia, Varini, Verjux, Tzivelos
Villa Redenta, Spoleto, Italy : Blacker, Toroni, Tzivelos, Varini, Verjux, Vilmouth
1987 *Colours of the World*, Paris : Blacker, Tzivelos, Varini, Verjux, Vilmouth

Ernest T.

Lives in Paris, France

Christos Tzivelos

1949 Born in Athens, Greece

Solo Exhibition

1986 Medousa Gallery, Athens

Group Exhibitions

1986 *ici Rome... à vous Paris*, Sala Uno, Rome
Jeune sculpture, Parc d'Austerlitz, Paris

Contemporary Art : Foerster, Mahé,
Ernest T., Varini
Villa Redenta 2, Spoleto, Italy : Buren,
Dauriac, Mahé, Ernest T., Leccia
E3 Australian Centre for Contemporary
Art (Melbourne), Institute of Modern Art
(Brisbane), Artspace (Sydney) : Blacker,
Dauriac, Foerster, Marek, Ernest T.,
Tzivelos, Varini, Verjux, Vilmouth

Group Exhibition

1988 **19&&**, Magasin, CNAC, Grenoble,
France.

Kate Blacker

1955 Born in Hampshire, Great Britain.

Solo Exhibitions

1983 I'Venster Gallery, Rotterdam, Holland
1984 **Second Sites**, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol,
England
1986 **Once Removed** Musée de Valence,
France
1987 **Matter of Fact**, Catherine Issert Gallery,
France.

Group Exhibitions

1982 Venice Biennale, Italy
1986 Villa Redenta, Spoleto, Italy
1988 E3, A.C.C.A., Melbourne, Australia

Jacqueline Dauriac

1945 Born in Tarbes, France

Solo Exhibitions

1986 ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de
Paris
1987 La Criée, Rennes, France
Galerie Roger Pailhas, Marseille, France
René Blouin Gallery, Montréal Canada
1988 Galerie Antoine Candéau, Paris

Group Exhibitions

1983 **A Pierre et Marie**, rue d'Ulm, Paris
1986 **Souvenir**, le Nouveau Musée,
Villeurbanne
Lumières, CIAC, Montréal, Canada
1988 E3 ACCA, Melbourne Australia

Dominique G. Foerster

1965 Born in Strasbourg, France.

Solo Exhibitions

1987 **La Ligne 19&&**, Galerie de Paris, Paris
1988 **-1999**, De Lege Ruimte Gallery, Bruges,
Belgium

Group Exhibitions

1987 **Journal**, in Journal, Los Angeles
1987 **In De Lege Ruimte**, De Lege Ruimte
Gallery, Bruges, Belgium
1988 **Villa Redenta 2**, Spoleto, Italy
E3, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane,
Australia

Raoul Marek

1953 Born in Bathurst, Canada.

Selected Exhibitions

1985 **Haus WAENDE**, Städt. Museum
Mönchengladbach, Germany with
Wolfgang Robbe
1986 **Monetary reform** Kunsthalle Frankfurt,
Germany with Boris Nieslony & Vollrad
Kutscher
1987 **Championship in their own land, part 1**
Salom, Salom am Burgplatz, Düsseldorf,
Germany, Performance
Documenta 8, Kassel, Germany - ASA
Galerie Maubrie, Paris, France
1988 **Kunstkongress 88** Kunstverein Hamburg,
Germany
Championship in their own land, part 2
Galerie Loeb, Bern, Switzerland
E3, Australian Centre for Contemporary
Art, Melbourne

France

1987 **Du goût et des couleurs**, Châteaux du
Médoc, Bordeaux
CREDAC, Ivry, France
E3, Australian Centre for Contemporary
Art, Melbourne, Australia

Felice Varini

1952 Born in Locarno, Switzerland

Solo Exhibitions

1986 Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris
1988 Venice Biennale, Italy
Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland
Domaine de Kerguehennec, France

Group Exhibitions

1984 **A Pierre et Marie**, rue d'Ulm, Paris
1986 **Repères**, Martigny, Switzerland
Villa Redenta, Spoleto, Italy
1988 E3, Australian Centre for Contemporary
Art, Melbourne, Australia
E3, Artspace, Sydney, Australia

Michel Verjux

1956 Born in Chalon-sur-Saône, France

Solo Exhibitions

1986 Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris
Maison de la Culture et de la
Communication, Saint Etienne, France
1987 Galerie Experimentale, Cité des Sciences
et de l'Industrie, La Villette, Paris
Galeries Contemporaines, Centre
Georges Pompidou, Paris
1988 Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts, Sion,
Switzerland

Group Exhibitions

1986 **Villa Redenta**, Spoleto, Italy
1988 E3, Artspace, Sydney, Australia

Jean-Luc Vilmouth

1952 Born in Creutzwald, France

Solo Exhibitions

1987 Maison de la Culture et de la
Communication, Saint Etienne, France
Espace II + III, ARC, Musée d'Art
Moderne de la Ville de Paris
Local Time, Magasin, CNAC, Grenoble,
France
New York/Paris/New York, Barbara Toll
Gallery, New York
1988 **Primo Piano**, Rome
Galerie Roger Pailhas, Marseille, France

Group Exhibition

1988 E3, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane,
Australia

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