1969–73 The Conceptualist: Each piece is part of a longer ongoing work

Fig. 1 ***Unrolled*** 1973
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In April 1998, a year before his death, John Davis was formulating a response to six questions set for a public forum, 'Responding to nature in contemporary art'.[1] Scrawled in his elegant script across the letter of invitation, Davis's notes amount to a brief but typically precise artistic and intellectual autobiography. Asked to describe the connection between landscape and Australian art, he instead listed a sequence of names and events that pointed to his formative artistic experiences. He identified his sculptor precursors, singling out Julius Kane and the younger Norma Redpath, both of whom had been members of Centre Five, a small, progressive band of modernists exhibiting totemic, biomorphic abstractions in the early 1960s. This is the milieu that Davis's early woodcarvings derive from. He then listed the 1973 *Mildura Sculpturescape*, where a new generation of artists, including Davis, moved past the modernism of their mentors during a brief phase of intense artistic crisis and experimentation. The earth art and conceptualist installations that resulted, including a key work by Davis in which he wrapped eucalypt trees with latex and cloth, were scattered across the dry floodplain between the Mildura Regional Gallery and the Murray River. And finally, Davis named the Tiwi pukumani artists of Melville and Bathurst islands, signalling the strong empathy he had developed for Indigenous art, an empathy that had led to attempts to collaborate with Aboriginal artists in the last decade of his life.

When asked which artists might be exploring the link between the natural and artificial, he homed in on not the artists of his own generation, nor on the established artists, but on photorealist painter Lin Onus and the mainly younger artists of *Australian Perspecta 1997: Between Art and Nature*, 1997, the biennial of contemporary Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales that had been devoted to the theme of the environment and art. It was typical of Davis to be so attentive not to a sculptor but to a painter, as well as to a much younger generation of artists in *Perspecta*, and to the politics of the environment of both. He wryly observed, however, that artists mostly imposed interior spaces and installations when asked to work outside, against or alongside nature. His marginal scrawl, 'political art is for the believer', appeared next to a list of familiar causes among artists from the late 1960s: 'logging, Franklin River development, sacred sites, mining'.

'Did the act of creation necessarily involve ordering, controlling or destroying nature', asked the forum organiser? Again, Davis deflected the question, listing instead a genealogy of American-based environmental artists: Robert Morris, Michael Heizer and Christo. He had written down another name, but then insistently and repeatedly crossed it out: earth artist Robert Smithson. Davis understood that Smithson, whose word-heavy, cross-media blurring of culture and nature

made him a towering figure in postwar American art, was an artist who neither ordered nor sought to subdue landscape and nature. Like Smithson, Davis saw works of art as stills in a movie, as parts of larger, longer processes. Back in 1982, Davis had written,

> Each piece is part of a longer ongoing work, a specific and at the same time general occurrence, a mass of detail demanding close scrutiny and because of its close approximation and juxtaposition, it demands that the viewer step back to encompass 'the view'.[2]

This was true of his late 1960s extruded fibreglass resin and aluminium bas-reliefs, his mid-1970s videos and conceptual installations and, later, his signature constructions made from sticks, twigs and twine.

The cosmopolitan significance of his answers prompts a revaluation of Davis's work, from the start of his career to its premature end. Davis was not an insular artist but one connected at all phases of his career to a wider perspective and bigger problems beyond the evolution of a distinctly Australian art practice. Just as this requires that we acknowledge Davis's artistic aspirations in hard-edged earlier works, so it also requires a focus on the three periods of the most dramatic transition in Davis's art: his flight from the sculptural object between 1969 and early 1972; a short, intense period of radical experimentation between later 1972 and 1975; and the years between 1977 and 1981 in which he developed his distinctive mature style.

This essay covers the first period of Davis's career as an artist up to his 1972 sojourn in New York; two following essays in this volume address his later years.[3]

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HAMPTON

John Davis's early woodcarvings are essentially sculptures to behold rather than to be navigated around. They are marked by the vitalist dynamism typical of Centre Five works of the period. But even though Davis had been developing forms 'that existed in the timber itself', he was instead making forms that multiplied a single primal form.[4] Both *Abreaction*, 1966, and *Bent on mayhem*, 1967, are made from many parts and imply extension beyond their edges rather than suggesting the centrifugal forces – the worlds within worlds – of equivalent Centre Five works; for example, Julius Kane's *Organic forms*, 1962. Both of these early works, in fact, resemble Davis's 1990s relief sculptures of fish made from calico, twigs and bitumen paint. The resemblance is not just formal but also thematic in the straightforward relationship between language and content and in a shared nature-driven quietude.

By the time Davis made *Drop out,* 1968, he was decisively seeking a sense of extension and weight, in much the way photographers of the period sought decisive moments in an image of gravity rather than its fact. As yet he had not shed the assumption that art addresses itself to the sense of sight. Manipulating and moulding aluminium, resin, fibreglass, automotive duco paint and rubber to create a simple image of erotic, liquid movement ruled by gravity required fastidious craft and a less than spontaneous dedication to machine-like finish. *Sixteen,* 1969, took the same scoop shape and multiplied it into a glossy white grid of identical falling forms. Davis then moved the result off the pedestal and onto the wall. It resembled minimalism with more than a hint of Pop. Any vitalist dynamism left over from his earlier woodcarvings was obliterated by the simulation of automation, by repetition and by the implication that everything could go on forever. The piece was part of a systematic and 'continuing move towards a negation of obvious subjective placement of form. Not fixed in time but suggestion of expansion by evenly distributed

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expansion tendency'. *One hundred*, 1970–71, was a yet 'more complete statement about scale and a diminished expansion tendency in spatial terms'.

Davis's relationship to the formalist, hard-edge abstraction that had recently been on show in the National Gallery of Victoria's inaugural exhibition at St Kilda Road, *The Field*, 1968, had a lot in common with that of Dale Hickey, Robert Jacks or Davis's friend Ti Parks, particularly in the way, according to contemporary writing on Parks, painting and sculpture overlapped. This overlap had a surrealist underside; these artists were reacting against sentimentality and the didacticism of late 1960s formalism. They were racing to find a different language. Ti Parks's *1969 no. 2*, 1969 (collection NGV), is not an exercise in hard-edge abstraction, nor minimalism. Most of Parks's picture consisted of areas of uninflected, hard-edge painting, but he had added something like a shallow, trompe-l'oeil grid, pouring paint through part of the geometrical patterning. The work revolved around the tension between geometry and illusion, a tension that is sometimes mistakenly likened to Pop.

What was at issue instead in Davis's and his more avant-garde friends' works, was the negation and reassertion of the body in which a continuing disguise of the handmade was both an evasion and a continuation (in fact) of a very Australian, make-do, jerry-built attitude, one that Davis was about to push through, stating that he was

> exhausted from the futility of preparing surfaces and the difficulties of protecting objects and signs of degeneration and decorative aesthetics since some conclusion had already been achieved in possibilities of scoop shapes. Need for radical shift and real emphasis on the process within work itself with the unpredictable and chance elements important rather than the object which is merely a vehicle for the process.
>
> He wanted to create pieces that would not depend upon maintenance, proper handling and perfect finishes, to move beyond images towards making facts.

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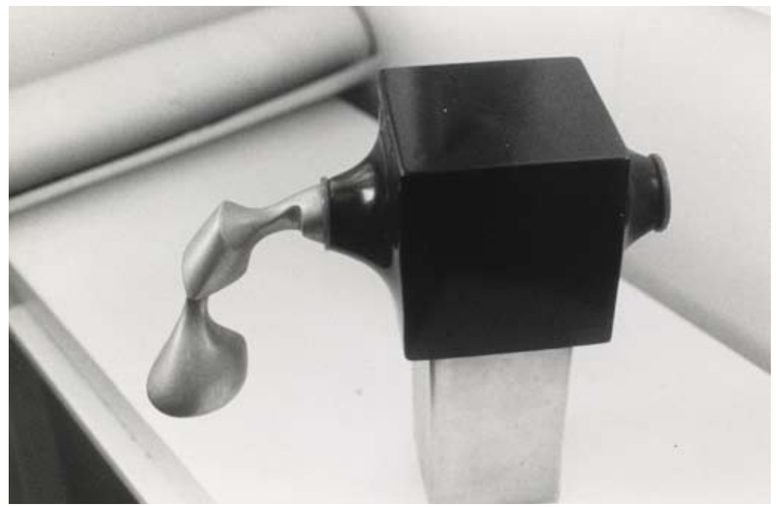

According to curator Robert Lindsay, an early supporter of Davis's work, the scoop shape had developed from the early wood sculptures.[5] It was the crystallisation of one motif. Once established, it stayed constant. This was no accident, for the motif was less important in itself and had become an illustration of the opposite of what sculptures and paintings are supposed to have: a boundary. An illustration of what? The scoops signified sculpture sliding off pedestals and walls, onto the floor, flowing beyond first generation minimalism. *Sixteen*, then *One hundred* and then the *Grass process works* of 1971 are all connected, and not just as different outcomes of the same handmade, backyard manufacture at Davis's suburban home. The lowering of sculpture onto the floor had profound consequences. He thought each new piece was a link to the last in a continuum from past to future, in the imaginary archive of works that he was already sorting. All sought a space that was neither the space of the wall, which belongs to paintings, nor that of the pedestal, which belongs to sculptures. They sought the rule of gravity, an entropic decay and formlessness that was becoming apparent, as well, in works of the same period by Guy Stuart, Ti Parks, Dale Hickey, Robert Hunter and Paul Partos.[6] These were not the irreducible artistic facts of classic minimalism.

Davis had cast and sanded his scoop shapes on his Hampton back lawn, leaving the negative shapes of green grass in a field of white paint dust when he removed the scoops. *Grass process work, part 1*, 1971, turned an accident into an artistic process. He stretched a sheet of plastic, from which he cut a grid of circles, each 28 centimetres in diameter, over the lawn. The grass in the circles grew and the negative shapes under the plastic turned yellow. Davis noted that this was a way of moving from an overdeveloped aesthetic, maintaining the same structural format of grid and circular, dropped forms, but also 'heightening chance element by introducing the processes of nature as the function of the work'.[7] The object was simply a vehicle for a process and further, it was 'a still point on a continuum'. He was beginning to blur natural and artistic processes, a method he would explore for the next decade. *Grass process, Heide, part 1* and *part 2*, 1971, took this a step further. He placed large sheets of plastic, from which a similar grid of circles had been cut, in two locations at the park between the Yarra River and John and Sunday Reed's new modernist residence, Heide 2. Late in the Reeds's lives, there was no formal public access to Heide or its collection (though the couple had continued to collect new art into the early 1970s, including sculptural abstractions not dissimilar to Davis's; Sidney Nolan's famous Kelly paintings were stacked one against another in the kitchen while newer, more severe acquisitions floated high on the Mt Gambier stone walls, and the audience for the two installations was small and invitation only.

It is significant that Davis's first installations were impermanent (one was soon almost obliterated when the river flooded) and must be seen through photography where the works' expanse is evident. At their large scale, about 4.5 metres square, the folds and billowing ripples of the plastic sheeting make the works look like drapery, monumental and baroque, not at all as provisional as the bricoleur's method and hardware store materials might have suggested. Davis's documentation, *Boxed work*, 1972, is a card index, almost a working manual. It documents the transformation of one work into the next in black and white photographs mounted on card tracing a systematic progression that originates with the fibreglass pieces. Photographs in the box show how he responded to the shapes left by white dust on the grass, covering the grass with plastic sheeting, trialling the process at home on his back lawn and then repeating it at Heide. *Boxed work* was neither simply the artist taking photos of his work, nor a supplanting of the work; it was a step along a process. *Grass process, Heide, part 1* and *part 2* were Davis's slightly late, post-*Field* galvanising moment: his move into process and its anti-aesthetics; his

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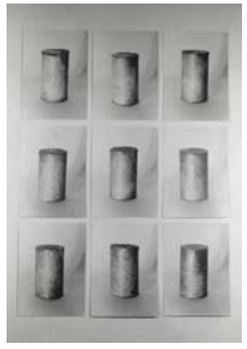
refusal of the compositional gestalt. We are wrong if we only seek to find beauty and continuity in these humble works. They represent a denial of landscape and Australian art's tradition of landscape.

Davis showed these photographs in a solo exhibition in May 1971 at Watters Gallery, then one of two Sydney headquarters of the avant-garde. Donald Brook, the most substantial spokesman for the new art in Australia, identified them as part of the flight from the object that he was pioneering: 'John Davis, like so many other sculptors today, is in his own example a metaphor of transition from an art of objects to an art of process'.[8] Daniel Thomas, writing for *The Sunday Telegraph*, also isolated the *Grass process* works for special attention, and was equally definite in his judgement. Brook saw that Davis was probing the limits of seeing through duration, and that the cut-out disks related to multiplication and excess, not minimalism. Davis's new, open-form sculptures were part of the appearance of post-object art. They fitted Brook's young, rebellious colleague Terry Smith's 'Proposition', written a month later for *The Situation Now*, a Sydney exhibition of the new post-object art: 'The most fertile kind of recent sculpture (perhaps of recent art) is open-form sculpture – not objects with a core, nor even physical objects arranged coherently, but rather dispersed, thrown, placed, laid elements, disposed in real space'.[9] And, as Smith outlined in his sixth and seventh 'Propositions', these sculptures ranged through scatter pieces, earth art, conceptual art and so forth, and were often modelled on social systems and forms. So, why the cut-out circles, and why repeat them in landscape? To saturate the viewer, to dissolve figure and ground, to test the viewer's stability. The viewer moved through seeing the image as a depiction of something, of plastic stretched across a grass field, then became bored or irritated at the banality of the media once it was grasped, then shifted to an appreciation of the documentary image, which finally transcended its original existence to become sheer information about visual language.

There was a relationship between the strict dimensions of such apparently casual art and its inflection with a latent but conscious political and environmental content by Davis and other Australian artists, including Guy Stuart, Mike Brown, Peter Kennedy, Nigel Lendon,

Sam Schoenbaum, Tim Johnson and others. John and his wife, Shirl, were committed Labor supporters. A Gough Whitlam poster hung at the end of the corridor of the family home for many decades, a reminder of this inseparable couple's shared passion about unionism, feminism and land rights. The content was implicit in the juxtaposition of the cool formal language of the *Grass process pieces* with their chosen location, rather than in symbolism or illustration. The phenomenology of open-form sculpture had been translated to a field beside the Yarra, not imported into the already reified white cube of the conventional Toorak dealer gallery, with which these artists were very uncomfortable. The New York conceptual art they were reading about in *Artforum* and *Studio International* and seeing at Pinacotheca and Inhibodress galleries was already too rarefied even though they understood that it represented a paradigm shift, one that they were deeply influenced by. For example, when Peter Kennedy was asked if he was a conceptual or a process artist, he replied, 'Neither, rather an environmentalist'.[10] Davis would have said the same.



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NEW YORK

In early 1972 John Davis and his young family set off for the obligatory extended Grand Tour overseas. He and Shirl had budgeted for twelve months travel. Davis took a year's leave from his teaching position at the increasingly conservative Caulfield Institute, to which he never returned (for he was immediately invited to join the new and much more progressive Prahran College sculpture department upon his return; Davis was always a popular teacher, committed throughout his career to encouraging young artists to being adventurous). The family travelled to San Francisco, then on to Los Angeles where Davis visited James Doolin, the American hard-edge abstractionist whose reductive, emblematic paintings exhibited in *The Field* had been so influential during his short sojourn in Melbourne.[11] Doolin's work had changed: he was now a photorealist, though this seemed quite consistent for his new work was as single-minded and as labour-intensive as his old, and photo-realism at that point was widely perceived to have links to minimalism in its sharp, cool rejection of self-expression. Davis met several Los Angeles artists, including local Cool School icon Laddie John Dill and the hugely influential CalArts lecturer and conceptualist John Baldessari. He disapproved of the former's parochialism and was keenly interested in the latter's – and CalArts's – internationalism.

They went to Mexico (where Davis, no member of the counter-culture himself, was bemused at being taken for a hippy), then on to New York (where they stayed in a hotel room for a couple of months), then to Montreal, Ireland and London. Typical Aussies of the period, they hired a campervan, took a ferry to Belgium and drove across Europe. In Germany they drove to the small town of Kassel to see the vast survey exhibition *Documenta 5*. They flew to Iran (travelling from Teheran down to Isfahan, where Davis was deeply moved by the vast, intricately decorated mosques and their open, public squares) then on to Hong Kong and Bali.

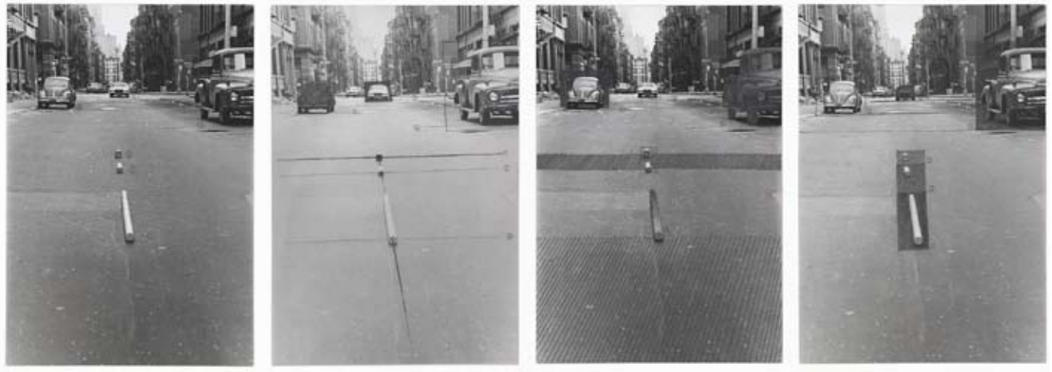
They travelled at a furious pace for the whole year, apart from the more extended stays in New York and London. Davis paid great attention equally to contemporary art, ancient monuments, the architecture of urban spaces and the many political rallies they encountered. His attentiveness to the industrious act of looking was very evident and, while this first trip had a great impact on Davis, it did not represent a paradigm shift. Davis had already travelling on the trajectory announced by the *Grass process pieces* for a couple of years. His flight from the object (to adopt Donald Brook's apt phrase) was powerfully confirmed by two encounters – with the New York art world and at *Documenta*. Both of these confirmed his understanding that everything and anything was possible as art, just as the final stops in his busy itinerary – Iran and Bali – led him to believe that any material could be used to make art and any culture could provide him with the shock of the new.[12]

Like most visiting Australians in New York at the time, John Davis was alarmed by the poverty and violence, and the general sense of social inequity. This was a particularly grim period in New York: the city was skating towards bankruptcy and, during Mayor John Lindsay's disastrous reign, the contrasts of extreme poverty, great wealth, spectacular modernity and its dark underside of poverty, racial inequality and crime was particularly stark. In his diary Davis records passing two dead bodies that had fallen from a high building, and then immediately expresses his amazement at the glorious Deco style of the Waldorf Astoria hotel. He walked across the Brooklyn Bridge, marvelling at the spectacle of the city with Melbourne curator John Stringer, who had been a curator of *The Field* but was now working in New York.

A couple of days after his arrival, Davis met Art & Language co-founder Mel Ramsden, who was about to return briefly to Australia. He found Ramsden both strange and intense. Ramsden offered Davis the use of his Bowery loft to live in for the duration of his stay. The next day Davis visited the loft and met Ramsden's artistic collaborator, Australian expatriate artist Ian Burn. For all his years in London and New York, Davis observed that Burn had retained an unexpectedly fierce 'Australianness', though he had established himself at the centre of conceptual art and become an artist of international stature. Davis's descriptions of his weeks in New York show just how many Australian artists and curators were resident in the city at that time: Robert Jacks, Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden, Paul Partos, John Stringer, Michael Johnson, Graeme Sturgeon, Clement Meadmore, and their partners. This was a tightly knit, small community; its members helped each other with introductions and advice and visited galleries together.[13] By contrast he had few contacts in London, a difference that would have been unthinkable ten years earlier. Australian artists' Anglophilia has been overestimated; even Sidney Nolan spent many months in New York during the 1960s and 1970s.

Davis was particularly close to Robert Jacks; registering a mutual disapproval of art that was 'professional', sharing a problem-solving approach to making art and working through sequences of concept-driven, systematic plans. He was in close contact with conceptualist artists and, even later in his career, did not reject their ideas but exaggerated the logic latent within cosmopolitan, global conceptualism. Davis meditated on the endpoint that art had reached, then decided: 'I see no point in re-using "post" formats to advance art, such as the Lyrical Abstractionists are doing at present in painting'. He was aligning himself with his Art & Language friends rather than with painters or sculptors.

Davis was beginning to make small sculptures on the kitchen table in their rented apartment, noting: 'cardboard cylinder and papier maché, systematized relationships of 3 forms developed though length/width/tone/perspective'. In the 1978 documentary film made for *Survey 1: John Davis*, he remembered that, without a studio, he embraced working with the materials at hand.[14] First, he covered nine found cardboard cylinders in papier-mâché then, rather arbitrarily, drew over them in pencil. He found the cylinders on the SoHo streets. By the evening, New York's streets are, to this day, covered with debris and rubbish left out by businesses for overnight collection; generations of artists have scavenged amongst this material for found objects. The second work he made was the successor to the *Grass process pieces*, called *Greene Street piece*, 1973–75. It consisted of three cardboard cylinders of different diameter, also covered in papier-mâché and drawn upon. After *The Field*, making marks was endangered. In particular, artists wanted to test the limits to the shape of the drawn surface. Did marks still carry any referential or formal charge when detached from a rectangular flat support? These were the questions also confronting Melbourne artist Robert Hunter at the same time, as he moved from painting on canvas or sheets of paper to stencilling marks directly on the gallery wall in temporary, ephemeral installations. Davis placed the cylinders in a line down the middle of Greene Street, a busy SoHo street running south–north so that – with larger cylinders further away – recession



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was negated. The cylinders now all appeared the same size. Once again, he was negotiating the role of the hand and the handmade, and also the status of the document, but now with a clear bow to, first, Jan Dibbets, the Dutch conceptualist artist whose whimsical, wide-angle photo-collages turned flat beaches into 'Dutch mountains' and, second, to German artist Franz Erhard Walther whose painted sculptures, also sometimes cross-hatched and drawn over, implied the artist's body or demanded the viewer interact with the object.

If anything Davis's perspective-contradicting cylinders have greater pathos and poignancy, since they were clearly about to either be damaged by trucks and cars or rescued at some risk to the artist or his assistant. The work was a function of the available material, its properties and pre-visualisation of the ephemeral action. This is emphasised by the formal composition – just casual enough and composed enough, as was typical of conceptualist artists' careful emulation of a snapshot aesthetics – of the final documentary photographs. The work is much more than an 'I was here' mark. The street was also a signifier of potential social and political action, especially for Davis. Mass demonstrations were part of the time and very much on the mind of artists. Davis took part in an anti-Vietnam War rally. Later, in London, he walked inadvertently into another anti-US march. Art's lack of direct usefulness, including political usefulness, was, in this context, something he not only felt was empowering but was unafraid (given his and his wife's consistent political activism) of acknowledging. He agreed strongly enough with the famous minimalist and conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, an active anti-Vietnam War activist and critical thinker about the signification of politics in art, to record this quote by LeWitt: 'If art deals with other than this world, then whatever it does is of little significance in the way we live: art is extra, even more so than Disneyland'.

Davis had the resulting grainy black and white photographs of the cylinders dry-mounted and they were exhibited several times. He noted that *Greene Street piece* was 'a reassessment of "art materials" and their role in art making in terms of my previous work … A search for basics'.[15] The cylinders were prototypes for the rods and the wrapped trees he was to develop for the *Mildura Sculpturescape* in 1973; the photographs of the cylinders were as much the work of art as the cylinders themselves. Davis, like earth artist Robert Smithson, saw individual works like film-stills in a virtual cinema of culture. Curator Robert Sobieszek has shown how Smithson was at that moment, in 1972, rejecting the conventional understanding of photography – that the shutter captured and encapsulated a decisive moment in a memorable form – in favour of art as virtual cinema, each work or photograph representing a stop along an archival process,

and this was exactly Davis's approach.[16] By now Davis was also seeing video and photography as an extension in the same way as drawing and sculpture. He had attended screenings of experimental film at the Whitney. He saw Bruce Nauman's 16mm film *Gauze*, 1969, in which the artist pulls five metres of gauze from his mouth, and Joan Jonas and Richard Serra's famous film *Paul Revere*, 1971.[17] They are the direct precursors of his own later videos, *Tearing*, 1974, *Plaiting*, 1975, and *Passage*, 1976.

In a meeting towards the end of his New York stay, Davis he showed Ian Burn his work and solicited his advice. Burn was interested in Davis's *Grass process pieces* and probed him about the transition he was making from conventional sculpture to 'other things'. It is a testament to Davis's tenacity that the next day he showed a folio of work to Ivan Karp at his gallery, OK Harris. The legendary art dealer and one-time talent scout for his previous employer, Leo Castelli, impressed Davis as rude, smart and opportunist. The works Karp was most interested in were, once again, the plastic-sheeted *Grass process pieces*. About the same time, Davis was buying up a large number of books on new art and kept a list of his purchases. He bought all the avant-garde, contemporary and conceptual art catalogues he could, including magazines such as *Avalanche* and European catalogues on Joseph Beuys, and he subscribed to *Artforum* magazine.

One purchase was the catalogue of the famous exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Whitney Museum, 1971 – an exhibition that had immediately attracted the attention of many Australian artists from afar. Davis's notes on that catalogue were prophetic, setting the tone for the next few years of radical experimentation:

> How does an artist elude style if one of his acts follows another? One method is by constantly changing materials or even media [Davis's emphasis]. Another is to conceive each work in terms of the freedoms and limitations of a particular time and place.[18]

Davis concluded that the new art was not a series of 'attempts to use new materials to express old ideas or evoke old emotional associations, but to express a new content'. He was about to see that new content's greatest manifesto.

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1973–75 The Reader: Sites and Non-Sites

KASSEL

Between the *Greene Street pieces* of 1972 and his now almost-forgotten videos of 1975, John Davis was resolving how his art could traverse both gallery and non-gallery spaces. His works of that period were deliberately experimental, investigating how to entangle thinking and moving in space, and how to present the viewer with that experience. This also meant a confrontation with the artist's body. Davis's restless experimentation over these years was rigorous; it is now just about lost, for audiences have become accustomed to seeing Davis as a landscapist out of time rather than as an artist deeply embedded in his time.

On 26 June 1972 John Davis arrived in Kassel, Germany, to see the famous landmark exhibition of international contemporary art, *Documenta 5: Befragung der Realität, Bildwelten heute* (Questioning Reality, Pictorial Worlds Today). On his way there, via the normal tourist destinations, he visited a Robert Morris earthwork in Holland near the coast, not far from Haarlem; it was already in a state of advanced disintegration and disrepair, a situation that Davis was clearly fascinated by. He arrived at Kassel only a few days after the opening and many of the participating artists were still there. He met Californian conceptualist John Baldessari again and was deeply impressed by the show. The famous curator Harald Szeemann had assembled new art that was, 'pushed to completeness in concept, scale and material and no loose ends. Astounding use of incredible variety of materials gathered in some cases'.[1] Davis talked late into the night with friends, including Melbourne curator Graeme Sturgeon, about the show. The next day he visited the areas that contained a bewildering combination of more traditional exhibits – including a substantial representation of photorealist paintings impressive for their 'incredible super-realism' – as well as a controversial combination of odd collections of kitsch and consumer goods, and of art by psychiatric patients and outsider artists.

Szeemann was the first star- or über-curator, his overwhelming directorial vision almost relegating artists to secondary importance. He had already established a reputation for curating controversial large-scale survey shows with *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, 1968. For *Documenta* Szeemann had orchestrated a prescient postmodern mix of high and low cultures, juxtaposing everyday items with dematerialised conceptual art from Europe and America. The retrospective aura with which this epochal exhibition is enveloped overshadows the fact that Szeemann's show also drew enraged responses from artists, most notably Daniel

Buren and Robert Smithson.[2] One of the key works in the exhibition was by Joseph Beuys, whose impact must be taken into account when considering Davis. The visual and emotional influence of a highly informal organisation of work, and the conversion of politics into art (which Davis deeply disapproved of), were an indelible and unavoidable reference point. Beuys was presenting his *Bureau of the organization for direct democracy*, 1972, comprising an 'office' staffed by volunteers that was also a forum for the charismatic artist to present lectures which unfolded across the one hundred days of the exhibition; it could never be experienced as a single fixed work and everything that occurred in the space became part of the art.

The desire to embody a similar principle of dispersal from an initial concept was to mark Davis's work for the next ten years. But at the same time, though Davis was a man of the Left, he found Beuys's didactic new work 'bad theatre' and an 'ego trip … using the show merely as a place to sound off'.[3] Beuys was making installations and videos that incorporated scruffy, decaying, disintegrating natural materials, an example relevant to Davis, who had already been impressed by another German artist at *Documenta*, Franz Erhard Walther, who had been exhibiting alternately rolled and unrolled swathes of canvas. Another important work that attracted his attention was the 'closing exhibition' of Marcel Broodthaers's seminal *Musée de l'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles), 1972. Later that year, shortly before he returned home, Davis made a point of going to the opening of a Broodthaers show in London. He also bought catalogues of Richard Long and Sol LeWitt at Lisson Gallery and visited a Gilbert & George show at Anthony d'Offay Gallery. This suspicion of political art surrounding artistic politics remained an undercurrent in Davis's art throughout his life. However, the example of these artists confirmed the direction he had already taken. They were turning rules and plans into something altogether more casual, informal and apparently provisional, like a diary, instead of art.

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MILDURA

Upon his return to Australia Davis sketched lists of previous pieces, defining the way one work had emerged from another, describing in words and neat diagrams how the scoop sculptures had turned into the winning Comalco Award commission (1971), which in turn had led to the 1971 *Grass process works* of 1971. He took two new works to the 1973 *Mildura Sculpturescape*, which was Mildura Arts Centre director Tom McCullough's breakthrough transformation of a well-established triennial national sculpture exhibition into the first of three encyclopaedic surveys of the new sculpture's manifold forms. The first was *Unrolled*, 1973, a length of canvas with forty-nine sewn pockets at regular intervals. Each contained a fired clay cylindrical rod, partly glazed in opaque white. Unfurled, the piece was more than fifteen metres long. In his drawings, Davis imagined canvas rolls of indefinite extension. He had already made another, smaller version, *Asyntactic part 1*, 1973, composed of sixteen rods in pockets along a similar length of canvas. These were simple materials with quite definite connotations: one painterly, the other sculptural; one light, the other weighty. *Unrolled* articulates an elegant tension. It echoes the way looking at art often involves a coming closer to material things and, at the same time, an act of imagination, a moving off from that world. The compact, portable nature of the work – the way it folded up like a piece of camping equipment and could in theory be displayed either extended or contracted – was both witty and challenging and incorporated Davis's own deep love of camping out in the bush. There was a political inflection to portability. It was Davis's desire for the work to be able to traverse both gallery and non-gallery spaces – both inside and outside. The rods were lines and the canvas was a field, so the work occupied a zone between sculpture and painting. The weight of the ceramic rods made the canvas hug the ground, much like American minimalist

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Carl Andre's floor reliefs, which Davis was aware of. The extension of form was at once directed to the body, to its capacity to move around the work and crouch down, but also related to how thought might be figured sculpturally, which is what the experience of duration itself would be. *Unrolled* represented an entangling of thinking and moving that would have been quite unexpected and unrecognisable to an already bemused *Sculpturescape* audience.

The second work Davis exhibited at Mildura was *Tree piece*, 1973. He wrapped six spindly tree trunks in six different ways, covering them in papier-mâché, canvas, plastic sheeting, pockets of grass clippings, sheets of latex or rows of sticks. His diagrams and notebooks attest to his desire to escape self-expression, aesthetics, beauty and all the old clichés. He saw he could do this through repetition, through systems of constants and variables, writing: 'Constant factor (trees) in amalgamation with variable factors (materials) which undergo change according to climate, vandalism'.[4] The constant element was the cylindrical shape of the trunk of the tree. The variable was the wrapping material. The work must be 'easily constructed, placed with difficulty and care'; portability was crucial. His undated notes for another slide lecture asserted the work was 'essentially non-commercial', and his aim was to 'present a new set of criteria about the site and situation rather than the structuring of an artistic object'. He wanted to encourage close inspection, to register the difference within repetition that his prior use of more conventional artistic media – canvas, ink, ceramics, plastic – could not as effectively elicit, since these media were so much more predictable, even at *Documenta*.

But the viewer would not spend time without motivation, here provided by the fascination of working out what Davis had done. Critic Gary Catalano asked:

> Why bind trees? I would like to think that this is the artist's way of saying that trees are not scenery, for the binding not only emphasizes their existence as three-dimensional things, but also suggests a divergence from the way we habitually think of landscape.[5]

He was right: *Tree piece* was not a view. Davis was refusing to participate in the tradition of white Australian landscape art. Catalano also noted astutely that Davis had little interest in expressively shaping his material. He was using nature as an extension of culture, as part of a possible artistic language, rather than as the projection of Australian identity. He was of course also reflecting the rising ecological and political consciousness surrounding the issue of the environment in the early 1970s. Other artists in *Sculpturescape* made similarly odd, equally reclusive modifications of the site. Ross Grounds excavated a large hole deep into the sandy ground that he covered with wire and a dome of sandbags; the visitor could then climb down into the untitled work, which reviewers named *Ecology well*. Like *Tree piece*, there was more or less nothing to see except something provisional, not even an autonomous image separate to its setting; in Grounds's case, the opening to a hole in the ground. Grounds and Davis were extending a cosmopolitan conceptualism based on a refusal of the image into the politics of making *Australian* art, a move that we will explore later in this volume.

Davis regarded *Tree piece* as an important work. He had arrived at the method that he would refine for the rest of his life. *Tree piece* prefigured his works of the early 1990s, in particular his tree wrappings with calico covered in pocket pouches containing sculpted fish, which he first installed beside the road to Balgo in the Western Australian desert and then at Heide in Melbourne. But he also turned the work into *Tree piece*, 1973, a group of three gelatin silver photographs that he next exhibited as a work in itself, a transformation that emphasised *Tree piece*'s place as a way-stop along a process. The photographs' status was deliberately unclear: were these photographs really independent works of art themselves? Or were they documentations of a work of art absent from the gallery? Were they supplements? *Tree piece*

reappeared as three documentary photographs, as *18 tree piece*, 1973, in *Recent Australian Art* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales later that year. The function of these photographs was like English land artist Richard Long's moody photographs taken during his hikes across wilderness areas that, accompanied by a caption explaining the place and the duration of the work, testified to the veracity of the original walk. Davis had seen a Richard Long show in New York in 1972 at the Museum of Modern Art and had bought books on Long. He was impressed with the afterlife that Long's walks had as photographs, sculptures and maps. But they were 'very romantic'. He disliked their poetic moodiness, whereas his notebooks and diagrams attest to his desire to escape self-expression and evocative aesthetics through repetition and through systems. This was not at all the John Davis we think we know.

RICHMOND

For his 1974 solo show in the vast warehouse space of Pinacotheca Gallery, the headquarters of the Melbourne avant-garde, Davis laid a series of works out on trestle tables, much as artists from Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden to John Nixon had done in the same space. Nothing was on a pedestal. The show included collections of objects in boxes, pouches and sewn pockets. The objects were samples of different materials, sorted and filed according to Davis's archiving impulses. Detailed notes, sketches and meticulous plans had preceded all these works. *Ingots*, 1974, a long box filled with nine papier-mâché ingots, nine terracotta ingots and nine lead ingots, was the most explicit statement of the importance of weight and lightness – a key theme throughout his career in all his work. Weight is inversely connected to portability and the contrast implies systems of exchange. Ingots imply gold; they are the measure of capitalist exchange. Much of Davis's work was deliberately light and compact to enable easy portability and potentially freer exchange. In the late 1970s this was to become the way he articulated in sculpture an alternative system in which he exchanged small sculptures for services. Physical lightness was more than just an aesthetic, more than a metaphoric way of expressing a certain humbleness that was characteristic and genuine, but also a gentle bringing together of art and life. He was suggesting an alternative mode of social relations, as had the much more aggressive, egocentric Joseph Beuys.

The Pinacotheca show also included *Asyntactic part 1*, 1973, a long swatch of white canvas with small pockets containing sixteen ceramic cylinders. This was the smaller version of *Unrolled*, which Davis had shown at Mildura. He also presented *Asyntactic part 2*, 1973, a white canvas bag with a pocket containing a sheet each of latex, lead, paper and fibreglass. These belts or bags could potentially be worn. In his notebooks the artist imagined these in movement on real bodies, gender unspecified. He called the bodies 'participants', and mused about making a video of the result in which his participants would be standing and moving. When rolled up, *Asyntactic part 1* was very compact. When rolled out, it looked deceptively long, also relating it to the *Greene Street* cylinders in the use of newspaper. Davis wrote a list of qualities that he presumably wished these works to embody: they would be 'non-aesthetic, non-design, non-predictable'. 'Non-aesthetic' concisely defined the early 1970s sensibility that he was investigating with other Australian artists in extremely radical works from which they all, from Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy to Dale Hickey and Robert Hunter, later retreated. Davis stressed that he was 'working contrary to reductive principle', and he emphasised this in his apt but archaic choice of title: the word asyntactic means without form or organisation. The odd trajectory of so many artists at the time, from Hunter with his wall drawings, Hickey with his descriptions of white walls, Parr with his lists of self-mortification, were all asyntactic and thus resistant to both formalism and beauty. Davis, like his friends, was even moving away from the appearance of minimalism and the

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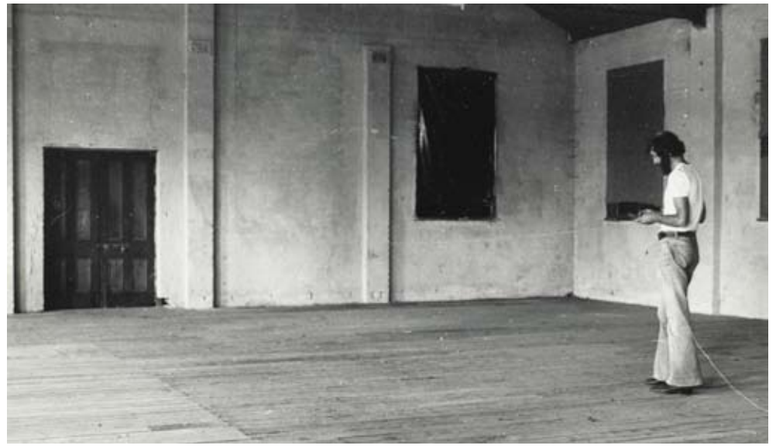
articulation of conceptual art by excluding grammar and grammatical relations as completely as they could. What was left without syntax (asyntactic) was lists and repetition.

At the end of Pinacotheca's vast space, past an installation that resembled a tent (a form that several other artists were also interested in), Davis placed a television monitor upon which a video, *Tearing*, 1974, was screening in which Davis simply tears up newspaper. His biographer, Ken Scarlett, called this work tedious, but the tedium was intended. An action was repeated in real time. This was not a performance and there was no drama or plot. The artist was evidently unsure of himself, uneasy in front of the camera, and even fumbled tearing up the paper. The piece can be compared to Mike Parr's similarly uninflected *Hold your breath for as long as possible,* 1972, or Stelarc's complex, slowly unfolding actions involving harnesses, trees and the artist's suspended, swinging body, also at Pinacotheca, both of which also survive only as grainy film or photographs. *Tearing* was documented in black and white video and Super 8 film, the medium of home movies. In a page of notes, 'Photographs with drawing', written in 1974 or 1975, Davis used the word 'reading' repeatedly. That the viewer should read and re-read, exhausting all the possibilities of a group of materials – whether photographs, ingots or objects in pouches – was important to Davis. He was patiently articulating space and time, emphasising the performative nature of any simple activity. When we wonder why he did this or why we should look at it, we should remember that his generation was faced with a novel but exhausting problem: how should you make art?

From the distance of the twenty-first century, the postmodern 1980s looks like the place to find the end of the belief in authentic self-expression, but this is to forget what resulted from the fracture and deep artistic crisis that pervaded the early 1970s. This is how Davis ended up with such repetitive, handmade, conceptual documents. The *Age* reviewer Maureen Gilchrist wrote that the exhibition was

> one which seeks a new aesthetic that goes beyond formal qualities to explore the problems and relationships between ideas and materials. What the work attempts to solve in this regard is as important as what it looks like.



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Alan McCullough saw the malign influence of proto-conceptualist Marcel Duchamp, who had only recently been rediscovered, in Davis's logical approach to art as a laboratory.[6] The reviews were accurate, for Davis's works represented withdrawal. Davis was now writing copious notes that functioned as instructions to the artist but were also addressed to the viewer as works of art in themselves, continually curating and re-packaging earlier works. He referred to this as an escape from 'the craft of tedious art production' and emphasised his willingness to embrace confusion. A 1974 text work, *Substance, cause, number, relation*, consists of fourteen typed quotations from philosophers including Spencer and Kant, defining space, place and time. During the same period German artist Hans Haacke was also giving familiar conceptual art procedures of listing and cataloguing a similar political inflection, locating, like Davis, the abstract questions that phenomenology asks into history and space.

Davis made three follow-up videos. In the first, *Plaiting*, 1975, filmed at Pinacotheca, the artist ties lengths of plaited string together. In the video only his busy hands are shown, but in a sequence of still photographs turned into an artist's book which he incorporated into a work that combined photographs and video, the lone, preoccupied figure of Davis in a white T-shirt and jeans moves slowly across the monumental warehouse space. In grainy black and white, he was a figure of vulnerable pathos.

MILDURA

Davis next made *Place*, 1975, a work dispersed across Mildura for the 1975 edition of *Sculpturescape*. It was in three parts, placed in a small room inside the Mildura Arts Centre: photographic and video documentation of *Plaiting*; photographs of three blank, white-painted billboard panels that he had placed beside three highways as each reaches Mildura; and one identical white board. The gallery became a place to gather information about the three experiences of reaching a periphery (the boards alongside the roads from South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales). His three-part, self-curated mini-exhibition was an intelligent understanding of the differences between gallery and real-time experiences of a site and a non-site. He was not presenting this difference as unfortunate but was incorporating the difference between the two terms into the logic of his work. To explain the term 'non-site' in relation to a

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'site', it is worth quoting from earth artist Robert Smithson's essay 'Dialectic of site and non-site', remembering that Davis had long been aware of Smithson's theories:

> There's a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quiet catastrophes taking place. The interesting thing about the site is that, unlike the non-site, it throws you out to the fringes.[7]

From Mildura's fringes, its peripheries, Davis presented the 'site' and the 'non-site' again at Monash University Gallery in September 1975. This time the white board moved around the Monash Clayton campus, located now in a treed, landscaped suburban setting rather than at the edge of a vast, semi-arid expanse. Relocation drew out the shifting nature of his (blank) white sign, as it did again in 1983 when the video recording the blank sign's nomadic journey was presented in the austere Melbourne space Art Projects, and it is not irrelevant to Davis's 'place' in the art world that, as late as the mid 1980s he could find a welcome in Melbourne's most audience-resistant, artist-run initiative. Davis's *Place*, like all his works indoors, was a non-site whereas the constructions he was making outdoors were a focus – a point of contained information.

Davis was beginning something that he developed into his mature works later, arranging inchoate objects together within containers or containing shapes, allowing the creation of internal formal relationships by the same semi-random entropic processes Robert Smithson had described through the image of a child in a sandpit irreversibly mixing black and white sands together into grey.[8] Earth art in Australia – which is best exemplified in the works of John Davis and also Marr Grounds – was not monumental and did not aim to dominate the land, as it did in American art in Michael Heizer's massive cuts into mountains, in his Nevada desert pyramids and bunkers, or even in Walter de Maria's vast field of lightning rods punctuating a high mountain plateau in the Rockies. The contemporaneous Australian version of earth art was more ephemeral and light in touch, aiming towards invisibility and seeking the condition of readable text. Davis's last video was *Passage. Part One. Scan. The You Yangs*, 1976. He wrote a description of the work when he exhibited it at the Experimental Art Foundation – founder Donald Brook's laboratory for post-object art in Adelaide, in May 1975. Davis called his video 'a formalist work composed of sixty-two views of an area east of the You Yangs, Victoria, and in which the work:

> 1.1. includes an element of chance in the placement of the artificial form (a white board), and in the situation of the natural phenomenon in the format presented.
> ii. Includes a determined structure in that the site was consciously selected for the placement of the natural phenomenon.[9]

He continued for ten points in which he isolated the site, the white board, as 'posed' for the camera. His staccato title suggested a work that was a 'loosely constructed, ungrammatical work that maintains importance in any manner of presentation'.[10]

Like *Plaiting* and *Tearing*, *Passage* was an assertion of the body and the potential for madness. Such repetition did not just express the automatic logic of the machine, as did a Donald Judd aluminium and fibreglass box cube, but it equally recognised the tendency within human behaviour towards psychotic repetition. His pedantry was deliberate. Davis was enumerating every possible quality, every description. The same impulse to list and enumerate every aspect of a particular, focused point or object was shared by many other artists at this time. And this was politically coded, encompassing the drive for change of the period. Davis's austere, uncompromising works between 1973 and 1975 communicate his will to disorder and his aesthetic restlessness.

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1977–81 The Nomad: ‘If my materials are temporal, it does not concern me.’

By 1977 John Davis had arrived at the low-technology method we associate with his mature work: twigs tied together with cotton, partly covered with papier-mâché, calico cloth, latex and bituminous paint. This combination of materials inevitably suggested weathering, bark, rocks, earth and particularly the Australian bush. But ‘suggest’ is too vague. From this point Davis imitated (rather than represented) the bush. Against the grain of Australian artistic tradition and along the grain of cross-cultural reconciliation, he sought the materiality of the bush rather than its look. His imitation amounted to a form of trompe l’oeil. He simulated the exact appearance of a zone between nature and culture, collecting his scruffy constructions into arrangements of small and large sculptures so they slotted together or meandered horizontally across gallery floors, like aerial views of miniature regions or provisionally constructed Lilliputian habitations.

John Davis’s identification with this apparently Australian natural world is the subject of this chapter. His sculptures after 1977 – and here for reasons of space we will chiefly discuss a few key works made between 1978 and 1981, closing with a description of his attempt at cross-cultural artist collaboration in 1993 – are an argument with white depictions of the Indigenous landscape. But they are also his re-engagement with the bush.

Davis had so far refused to participate in the tradition of Australian landscape art, instead seeking the most cosmopolitan of artistic languages – conceptual art’s systems and rules. He then displaced conceptualist structures into natural or, more accurately, in light of his 1975 works like *Place*, into peripheral locations. He had deliberately and carefully reduced the potential for creating uncanniness or pantheistic weirdness, minimising any spooky Picnic at Hanging Rock effect. Thus, though *Tree piece*, 1973, sounds as uncanny as any of the erotic sculptures by Davis’s much more surrealist-inclined friend Kevin Mortenson, in fact it is a rational proposition with a clear structuralist logic using both natural and manufactured materials. Davis had displaced conceptual structures more or less according to a particular system first articulated by his American contemporary, earth artist Robert Smithson, of sites and non-sites. Like Smithson (whose influence was keenly discernible), Davis was directly using nature – natural materials, natural shapes and natural forms of organisation – as an extension of culture. As such, nature was part of a possible artistic language rather than the embodiment of white Australia’s identity. To reinforce what a complex, fragile balancing act of identification and disavowal this was, it should be remembered that, as a result, Davis himself became a highly visible artist representing Australia abroad. Further, he became part of the raising of ecological and political consciousness surrounding the issue of the environment in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, he was deeply respectful of Aboriginal people’s prior occupation of the land.

Davis was no naive primitivist or hippy flake. He was, however, one of a small group of Australian artists – Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers are two others – who understood that if contemporary artists of his generation were to see nature as an extension of culture – as art theory pushed them to do – then it followed that these white artists would seek an intimate relationship with Aboriginal culture. This, in turn, would expose such artists to caricature and criticism. Davis certainly understood this might happen to him.[1] He was a gentle and unlikely radical.

EXCHANGE

From 1976 Davis began making small constructions from the twigs of native species, from twine, papier-mâché, twine and pigment. These materials were readily available and inexpensive. The parts were suitcase-sized or smaller, were easily made in small rooms he called studios and were not disruptive to domestic rhythms. They were ecologically sound, consisting of simple, biodegradable (though not recycled) materials. They could be combined, arranged or slotted together to make larger, even grand, expansive forms. If this was bricolage, however, there were some rules. Not all materials were welcome: it is not true to say, as have most critics, that Davis used whatever materials were at hand. He worked with a narrow and rigorously consistent repertoire. The malleable eucalypt twigs and sticks he gathered were not always at hand, even in suburban Melbourne, just as kangaroos did not hop down the streets of Hampton: he went on camping trips to Hattah National Park, near Mildura, and other favourite semi-arid landscapes to find bundles of the types of twigs he preferred. For the most part there are only twigs, twine, a very limited palette of white, black and earth-coloured paints, tar, latex, canvas, calico and papier-mâché in his assemblages. There are occasional appearances of feathers, bones or animal and human-derived substances such as hide or hair (materials that his contemporaries Ross Grounds and Ti Parks had used). Davis combined his typical materials without subjecting them to any artificial weathering process such as fire or baking in a kiln to make them appear more 'natural', though his works have inevitably changed colour and become more and more fragile with age.

There are a few exceptions: *New England*, 1979, and *Place two. An installation*, 1981, a sprawling installation he created for the Australian Sculpture Triennial at LaTrobe University. Both included slabs of visibly sawn timber. In *Place two* weathered, sawn planks form the sides of a central tower, capped by a latticework construction made of more familiar materials. It was surrounded by smaller sculptures. One mimicked a boat, another a hill ridge seen from the air, and another an encampment. For all this architectural anthologising, Davis was not a bowerbird – there was never any trace of the silver foil, plastic bags or other garbage commonly found in the bush. Davis gathered his materials and stored them until use. Thus they are, strictly speaking, not composed of found objects any more than a stretcher made of cedar to support a canvas is a found object. Neither *Place two* nor *Region*, 1981 (Art Gallery of Western Australia) mimic the appearance of anthropological work, as did American artist Mark Dion, who collected discarded debris and deposited it into an archival display so that garbage resembled specimens. But Davis's materials remained consistent, superficially nondescript, mostly small and approximately of the same scale, like building blocks. This focused attention onto their character: they were the elements of constructed, handmade models consistent with each other and with the rules he had invented to elaborate and *build* a larger, overall view.

Almost as soon as Davis arrived at this method, he began reserving parts of potential assemblages as small sculptures, each able to be held in the hand and passed from person to person as exchange works. These were pieces that he would exhibit and donate 'in exchange for other art, service, or anything the recipient wishes to offer'.[2] Davis made his first exchanges

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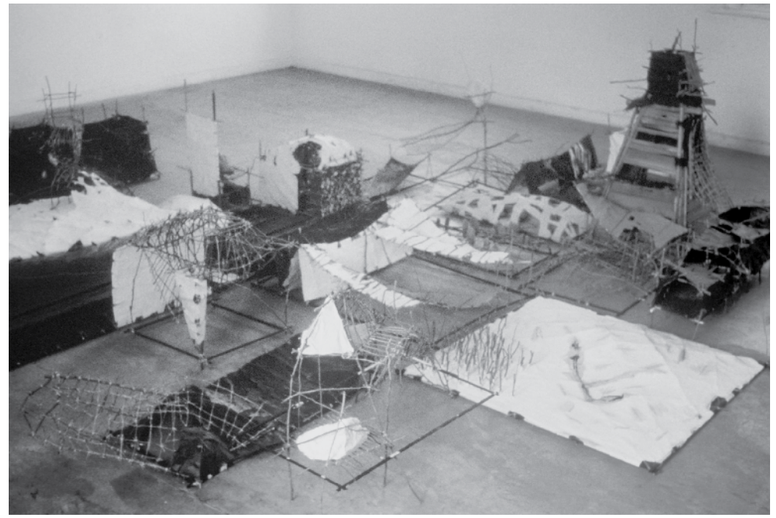
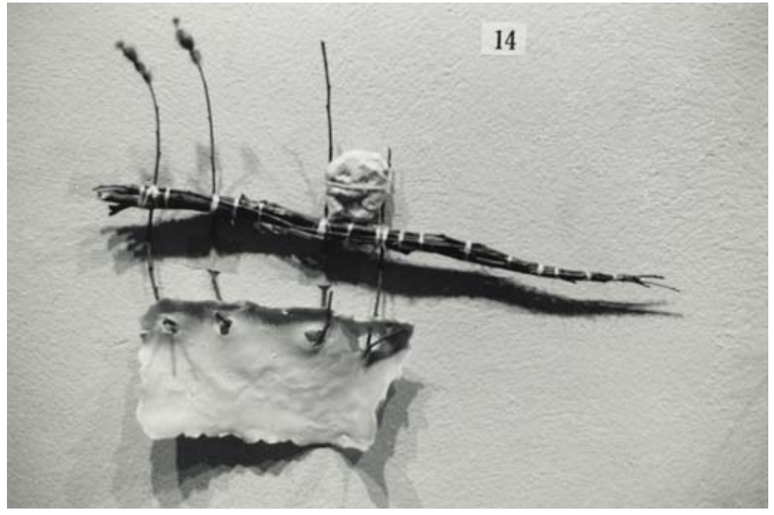
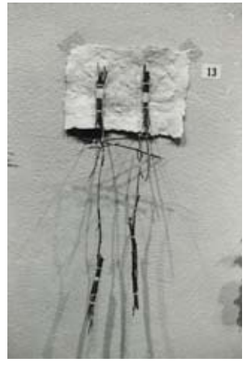


in 1976, giving pieces to students at Prahran College of Advanced Education where he taught, then repeated the gesture on more than five occasions. At Watters Gallery in 1977 many artists including Robert Owen and Tony Coleing and curators including Bernice Murphy and Nick Waterlow acquired their little works. In Delhi, at the Indian Triennial in February 1978, the list of recipients included Geeta Kapur, the postcolonial critic and her partner, artist Vivan Sundaram. Davis continued the process in Japan, then at performance art festival ACT 1 in Canberra in 1978, and in 1984 in Los Angeles, where he gave away seventeen pieces, including one to art critic Lane Relyea. In Suzi Gablik's now dated 1981 *Art in America* overview of contemporary Australian art, she reports on a visit to Davis's studio where she was deeply moved by her acquisition of an exchange piece.[3]

The idea of bartering art for tangible goods or services instead of money had wide currency in the 1970s. This issued from four strands of thinking, all of which Davis was aware of even though he had no deep allegiance to them. First, the idea owes a clear debt to Marxism, to Marx's analysis of money's displacement of labour and its circulation as a fetish; theories familiar in general terms to all young leftists. Second, alternative forms of exchange found in so-called primitive societies, including gifts and their ultimate exaggeration, the potlatch (or ruinous gift), were widely discussed in art magazines and among artists during the period, most notably through the vogue for books on anthropology, particularly Claude Lévi-Strauss's best-selling books on structural anthropology. Third, as Davis was aware, there had been many attempts by artist organisations and alternative spaces to develop more artist-friendly exchange mechanisms; for example, ex-conceptual art entrepreneur Seth Siegelaub's development of the famous standard artist-gallery contract in 1971. Fourth, like Joseph Beuys, Davis saw teaching as a process of exchange.

Davis kept careful lists of the exchange works as they left his possession. They represented the continuation of his process-based work and videos, as he moved to a form of social engagement in which his list represented an index of artistic actions, the actual exchanges. The status of the individual sculptures, beyond their limited complexity, was less: a place in a chain of small-scale, usually individual, exchanges. In most cases, unlike the spectacle of public performances





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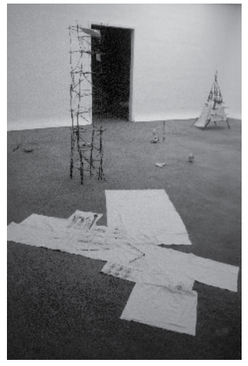
or actions, there was no public audience beyond the artist and the recipient of the exchange. His little sculptures also demanded reciprocity and this was effectively a contribution towards the creation of a collective community that was determinedly international.

It would be incorrect to see Davis's works as heirs to the pastoral idiom in which artists from Streeton to Olsen had celebrated an Indigenous, atavistic, white Australian nationalism. And he had also, at least in his early works, participated in the visual logic of international postwar consumerism and then in its rejection. It is easy to see that his later works are set between these two models of white identity, both of which were passing away in Davis's time to be replaced by an ideal model of settler participation in indigeneity and Asia – a double ideal of reconciliation that did not last beyond 1996 with the election of the Howard Government and the beginning of a legislative rollback of Land Rights – of which Davis is exemplary.[4] He was now trying to give away the farm, or at least the twigs that lay upon its ground.

VENICE

Continuum and transference, 1978, the installation that Davis presented at the 1978 Venice Biennale as one of three artists representing Australia, stands as the first coherent, major outcome of his new method.[5] The works, if they were not to be exchanged, were essentially monuments. They invited the experiences of recollection and the projection of desires and memories. The pieces he had taken earlier that year to Delhi for the Fourth Indian Triennial were transitional. Composed of a group of smaller sculptures spread with deceptively casual disorder across the floor, the Delhi installation was nevertheless ruled by a spatial logic – he was basically marking out the gallery's perimeters and edges – that he was soon to abandon in favour of an expanding compositional method. As markers of the edge of the space, the forms defaulted into shapes that a little awkwardly echoed Joseph Beuys's famous *Fat corner*, 1968. *Continuum and transference*, on the other hand, flirts with another aspect of Beuys: his atavism. The work had five, semi-autonomous parts, each of which could have stood alone but none of which was dependent on the gallery space for its shape or identity: *Marker*, 1977, *Ridge*, 1977, *Tower*, 1978,



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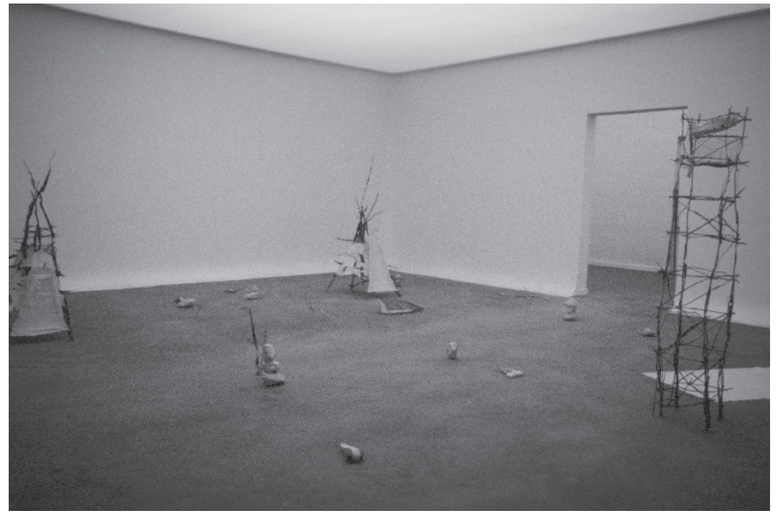

Device, 1978, and *Flag*, 1978. He had incorporated the residues of previous works, including parts of his Delhi installation from which one part, *Marker*, became *Marker A* and *Marker B* in Venice, similarly *Flag* was later renamed and expanded into a new work, *Flag renamed place*, 1981. Davis's diary entry emphasised how important it was the white cube of the gallery space be diffused, that its edges be as ambiguous as the individual pieces' provenances. He had unpacked the work, noting with great relief, given the fragility of his pieces, that there was very little damage, but that the floor of the space was 'like a wall'; he would have to 'dirty' it, distressing it so that the space was not so clean, neat and precise.[6]

Before the grand opening Davis noted with satisfaction the underpinning of the apparently casual work: a triangle established between three major forms, three lines, and three devices. Again he was insisting on repetition rather than difference or mimesis, gathering the distinction from his notes a couple of years before on Marcel Duchamp.[7] He had written that if the number 1 implied unity, the number 2 suggested duality, and the number 3 implied multiplicity. He had even transcribed a quote from Duchamp: 'For me it is a magic number, but not in the ordinary sense … 20 millions or 3 is the same for me'. Three meant repetition, not mimetic mirroring. Davis's notes were arcane and oddly technical, but they indicated how repetition presented itself to the viewer, what meaning resulted, and the significance he placed upon these concepts in organising his works. He was, of course, engaging with the central questions of the 1970s international avant-garde and its aesthetic of *l'informe* (formlessness or open form). He was truly delighted with the response to his installation: 'I think that my work was well received by the 'art group' even to the extent that Arturo Schwartz complimented the work extraordinarily well'. Schwartz was a famous Duchamp scholar, an originator of esoteric theories such as those that Davis had written about, and he represented the exclusive European avant-garde art establishment. Davis stated that he 'rejected the idea of outright ritualistic arrangement but more subtly related to the form of an Australian landscape'. For him, form followed entropy, creating his 'emphasis on flatness and abrupt height, random placement of loose objects, the ritual follows'.

The Venice installation was built around his expandable assemblages (they could extend like Lego) rather than the room's edge. Whereas the photographs of the Venice installation tend to

situate the work's centre at the centre of the frame, and thus implicitly attempt to stabilise the structure and the limits of the open-ended forms, visitors tend to remember a more volatile situation. They negotiated a work that seemed unstructured, varied and shifting, a work that was open and vulnerable, subject to potential vandalism by those who entered the room. The recurrent impression was of open-endedness and stitched, winding shapes that were open enough, like the lattice of *Tower*, or slight enough, like *Device*, to be cryptically wedged between drawing, writing and sculpture. His arrangement of sculptural units looked informal and changeable, but was dominated by the tower and the two pyramidal markers, which abruptly occupied the vertical plane. The elevated structures, almost constantly visible, delineated the vertical plane and limits of the room as provisional and shifting markers. The three larger sculptures established a set of relationships across a horizontal zone, implying out-of-scale actions from which the whole had been derived, not unlike Davis's imagined 'participant' who would have worn *Asyntactic part 1*, from the Mildura Sculpturescape in 1975, like a belt. In this sense the Venice installation is a landscape consisting of a group of connected monuments reflecting the movement of a figure or figures we do not see. This figure is the artist's body, a body easily glimpsed in the videos of 1975 but still present here as the ghost animating the parts of a machine made of twine and twigs. A couple of years later, in 1982, he returned from an artist residency in Tokoname, Japan. The experience, the follow-up show in Tokyo and an unexpectedly intense response from the ikebana community had all deeply affected him. When the editor of a Tokyo publication on ikebana approached Davis and his friend Ken Scarlett for an article on his work, Davis wrote a long statement, including the defiant statement: 'If my materials are temporal, it does not concern me'.[8] The word 'temporal' was either a malapropism or was intentional, and he was identifying the presence of the artist's body animating installations that were to be imagined as if worn, or navigated as though seen as aerial views.

The small sculptural forms splayed across the floor, however, are characterised by their compression. They are forms scaled to and shaped by the human hand, like the exchange works. *Ridge* resembled an aerial view of a low mountain range (the analogy is Davis's). These relationships arose through scanning the floor like a page and looking down at the pieces as models. The pieces occupy a horizontal plane, a feature of the work exaggerated both by the evident gravity, the detailing of the small objects, keeping the viewer at a distance, which was the only way to see the work overall, and by presenting a collection of small objects in a horizontally arranged *Wunderkammer*, or curiosity cabinet. In stark opposition to the contained space of most works in the biennale, including those of his compatriots Robert Owen and Ken Unsworth, *Continuum and transference* presents a seemingly limitless space and a marked disjunction between the location of the installation (in crumbling, cultivated Venice) and the presentation of twigs from the bush near Mildura. The title, *Continuum and transference,* signalled the intensity of that disjunction: transference referred to the removal of objects from the site and their relocation in a non-site in Venice; continuum referred to the invisible link between the site and the non-site.

Davis was asking his audience to see double: to attend closely to the physicality of the detail and think outside those conditions to an overall view. He presented this as an implicit internationalism. The international world of contemporary art (at least during the 1970s) was a community. The relationship between the parts and the whole in which his small sculptures were arranged was the binding together of an intense physicality and a disembodied scenography, analogous to the problem of how one understands events that are remote, even alien. In the era of the Cold War, this was politically resonant.

The second political context might be described as Davis's relationship to indigeneity. I have described how, in Davis's arrangements, the spreading of small sculptures provides the structure

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for a kind of signing or writing: *Continuum and transference* spread with a centripetal slowness that suggested the Indigenous landscape, one that white Australian visitors and critics, at least, knew they needed to read. In the Venice catalogue Norbert Loeffler wrote that Aboriginal art had become one of Davis's sources, and that *Continuum and transference* was a celebration of natural cycles and forces.[9] He referred to the belated discovery of Aboriginal art by an increasing number of local artists. But I am not at all sure that his works embrace the landscape, as many writers like Loeffler have asserted, in my opinion, somewhat hazily. Davis himself at different moments played this down or up, sometimes flirting with the idea of a distinctive Australian identification with the land. Instead, his sculptures had an uneasy distance from the depiction of topography. When placed outdoors, his early and later works look as if another register of language has been added to the natural world. This was how his intervention, *Tree piece*, had appeared at Mildura. Davis's shapes did not quite echo natural forms but rather, at least by 1978, simulated an Aboriginal representation of natural forms, they were second-degree representations, no matter how unlikely this sounds. If anything, they were moving close to American sculptor Charles Simonds's contemporaneous, somewhat saccharine architectural models in clay of fictional Little People. He made miniature models of ruined pueblos and deserted cliff-top villages, inserting them in his most memorable early work in gritty, inner-city vacant lots, photographing them or leaving them in unlikely places, high on window sills in art museums such as the Whitney, where one survives to this day on a window ledge in the stairwell.

In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart links the desire to invent worlds that 'work' – model worlds – to dream-narratives of the inanimate made animate.[10] The model is a metaphor for interior time and space, just as the gigantic stands for the authority of the collective and the state. These narratives of the self and the world reveal a longing for a place of origin. Davis's new, hyper-descriptive, rough-looking models were mistakenly understood to have displaced his conceptualism. But the anthropological ethic of conceptualist fieldwork had survived in Davis's newer, stitched, bituminised and stretched forms. Papier-mâché obscured the geometric simplicity of his previous minimalist structures. It turned cubes and ingots into traces of natural objects, but with the disquietude and uncertainty that the reappearance of figuration entails.

I am arguing here that Davis's work is in intimate double dialogue with his historical moment: the Cold War and the looming issue of Indigenous reconciliation. There was no overt reference in his post-1977 installations, thus far, to the legacy of the dispossession of Aboriginal people. But the amnesia of late 1970s and 1980s Australian consumerism, heading towards the Bicentennial year, urgently demanded forms of collective memory that could encompass the world beyond Australia and the dispossession of Aboriginal people. This would throw into chaos the previous norms of representation – the pastoral landscape so ably deconstructed by Ian Burn and his team of co-authors in *The Necessity of Australian Art*.[11] From his early career Davis had sought to escape the condition of being an Australian artist. He wanted to be an international and cosmopolitan artist. Even though he was seeing the prime subject of white Australian art – the bush – in a radically different way, different to the regionalist landscape oil painting tradition that was so exhausted by the 1960s, it had not been his focus until now. During the 1970s this attitude was affected by his imaginative, if cautious and self-conscious, empathy with Aboriginal culture and tempered by his understanding of the relative powerlessness of living in Australia but wanting to be an international artist. This was the provincialism problem that critic Terry Smith had defined in an essay of the same name in 1974.[12] Davis had read the article in the New York art magazine *Artforum*. Smith had arrived at a bleak determinism summed up in the sentence: 'As the situation stands, the provincial artist cannot choose not to be provincial'.[13] He used this definition to set up a model that saw the New York art world as the metropolitan centre with all other art communities, including large, often culturally autonomous, confident cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Sydney and Melbourne as provincial. The international art world's premier showcases of contemporary art – the Venice Biennale above all – had superficially provided opportunities for artists from around the world to show their work on an international stage, but in fact only within predetermined identities, within an atlas of the world in which the North Atlantic was central and everywhere else either marginal or completely absent. This absence could either be imposed from above, based on invisibility, or the provinces might even pride themselves on their insularity, as Australia often did.

Davis's towers and bound forms at Venice addressed this bind by looking into the distance both forwards and backwards. The view was, we have established, both prospective in that it was addressed to the *future* reconciliation of the political and social Australian landscape that was its subject, and retrospective in that it was constructed from traces, indexes of actions. This would have been thoroughly comprehensible to the biennale's knowledgeable, avant-garde audience. But either way, the Venice installation, as Davis well knew, appeared within the horizon of a powerful provincialism. Other white Australian works and theorists of the time aimed to construct solutions to the provincial bind, for instance identifying with a Dreaming – a landscape of traces – attempting cross-cultural image-making and a link with Aboriginality. Apart from Tim Johnson's paintings and Imants Tillers's early canvas boards, the best and most audacious examples were in film. Michael Glasheen's avant-garde video *Uluru: Mythology of the Dreamtime*, 1978, used time-lapse photography, superimpositions, video mixing and rapid montage in an extravagantly psychedelic twenty-four minute portrayal of Uluru screened in art house cinemas in Melbourne and Sydney. By comparison, overseas artists such as Nikolaus Lang and London artist collective The Boyle Family came to Australia for the 1979 Biennale of Sydney, visiting the outback to record and mimic the strata and textures of the red landscape with more conventional results. Lang's works attracted negative criticism, Gary Catalano writing: 'His works trespass on the terrain of a host of other disciplines – among them geology, anthropology, geography and archaeology – and effectively trivialize both their objects of inquiry and their procedures'.[14] Davis was aware of the problem of sentimentality; his distaste back in New York in 1972 for English artist Richard Long's rambling romanticism is worth remembering.

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CAPE SCHANCK

In 1979 John Davis wrote to curator Robert Lindsay describing a new work, *Cape Schanck*, recently exhibited at Art Projects, that the National Gallery of Victoria was acquiring. Lindsay had recently curated Davis's first mid-career survey, the debut of a series of groundbreaking *Survey* exhibitions at the NGV. Davis explained the work had emerged from the Venice installation. Though its symbolism was 'much more apparent', he wrote, 'the work is not an illustration or reaction to Cape Schanck. It received its title from the fact that the four rocks placed on the green canvas originally came from Cape Schanck'.[15] He wished to give no precise instructions for spacing its three constituent parts – a tower, a string and linear attachments, and a platform with objects arranged on its top – except for observing that, if moved too far apart, the visual links would be broken. He definitely did not want the three smaller part-sculptures shown separately and asked that the work be kept apart from others, for it needed separation by sufficient space or by walls. Davis was, in sum, insisting that the work was not a landscape and also that he was not interested in defining the edges of a white gallery space; he was neither a semi-figurative sculptor nor a formalist. The shape of both the platform and tower were analogous to ceremonial forms inside temples and to temple towers that had deeply impressed him in southern India in early 1978, before Venice. The vertical stretch of his tower, from its canvas stripes to the lattice top, was a movement against gravity. The stripes suggested an unfurled flag or awning with ceremonial associations that recall exploitations of gravity, from American minimalist Robert Morris's felt *Untitled*, 1970 (which entered the NGV in 1974) to Joseph Beuys (whose *Stripes from the house of the Shaman 1964–72*, 1980, was soon to be installed by Beuys at the new National Gallery of Australia in Canberra). *Stripes* included the coat Beuys had worn during performance actions in his office at *Documenta 5* in 1972, which Davis had seen.

Throughout this volume I have alternately pointed out how Davis wanted his art to evoke the Australian bush landscape and how he wanted his art to exist beyond such limiting definitions and address other, more cosmopolitan questions altogether. I have myself oscillated, as he did, between these descriptions of his work. Now we come to an awkward but important question: what happens when white artists identify with Aboriginal culture or with its presumed ways of seeing? What could a respectful, thoughtful white artist share with Indigenous culture's deep identification with the land?

We know that Davis was proud of his formal sense, his ability to organise and patiently work things through, to make good art out of poor materials, and his scepticism about mawkish sentiment ('political art is for believers', he had written in the testament quoted early). In an artist statement for an Adelaide exhibition he observed: 'The work I make is formal and structured like a Western artist's. It hasn't got the feeling of myth and ritual that Aboriginal art has'.[16] Davis kept a rein on white Aboriginality if he could: American art critic Robert Berlind, thoroughly briefed by Davis for the latter's 1994 American solo show, commented: 'But Davis has never, to my knowledge, made a work that actually resembles art of the Aborigines, either in general format or in its particular formal vocabulary'.[17] This is debatable, but the desire to avoid portraying Davis as a latter-day Margaret Preston synthesising Aboriginal art was understandable if probably over-cautious. Davis put nature and culture, Western avant-garde and identification with the *Australian* land (this definitely involved a degree of identification with Indigenous culture) together not to undo the oppositions but more to reconcile them. From all accounts he did not consider himself a mystical person. He was a leftist, a Labor Party member. And so I am not sure that though his works reveal a generalised empathy towards Aboriginal art and a generalised quotation of the look of Aboriginal living or architecture, this is a parallelism, and certainly not as

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has been ascribed to him, a parallel internalising of natural cycles as a means toward belonging, an identity politics. This would have been crass, and Davis's later works, I have been arguing, insisted consistently upon their otherness in a very subtle and more architectural way.

For it was Davis's sculptures with their sheer, ancient-seeming *otherness,* rather than their urbanity, that made his works (and his exchanges) seem so magnetic and compelling to younger artists and students at this time. Davis was an older artist who was consistently placed alongside a younger generation, and who fitted young postmodern theorists' (if they had only made that leap as well) emerging identikit of a distinctively Australian multicultural, appropriation-based postmodernism. Paul Taylor's catalogue essay for his NGV survey of postmodern art, 'Popism', set out to explain the apparent amateurishness of his young artists' retrospectively disconnected works, explaining that they were all blurring the distinction between high and low culture.[18] The *look* of Davis's bricolage and low-tech tinkering fitted that definition, but instead of blurring high and low culture, he was blurring nature and art, and indigeneity and white art. Davis's works were palimpsests, and these beasts became important at this juncture. Taylor noted that the works in *Popism* were all in some way indebted to photography, the medium of the indexical transmission of images. They were a palimpsest, a 'surface that has been written on, erased, and written on again', in the sense that images take on new and different, unintended meanings dependent on the reader rather than artistic intention.[19] In 'Popism: The art of the white Aborigines', Taylor made this clearer: the connection between the palimpsest and Australian culture was that the latter's originality appeared as it did in disco, as variations on the original.[20] Then, in a much-reprinted essay commissioned by Taylor for his magazine *Art & Text*, artist Imants Tillers explained how Australian artists and writers had attempted to create an 'Indigenous' Australian art by incorporating aspects of Aboriginal art and culture into their work.[21] Even though Taylor would shortly make a special case for Davis, placing him alongside Mike Parr, Tillers might have bracketed Davis in this category.[22] Even if this tactic appeared to be successful, attracting international attention, it would soon became clear, Tillers

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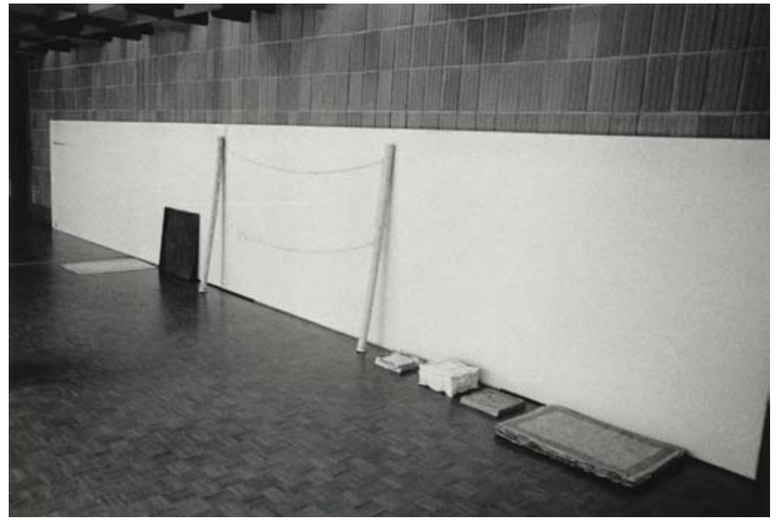

wrote, that real overseas interest was in Aboriginal culture, not in the urban culture of white Australia. Tillers argued that this incorporation could never succeed because 'locality fails' (this was the title of his essay). In retrospect, he was correct. Davis wanted to locate a contemporary place where identity would not be a primitivist fetish, nor would it require him to hide his prized experiences of being in the bush (remembering that Western Desert painting in particular and Aboriginal art in general had not yet become omnipresent, iconic and as monumentally famous as both have since become). In his sculptures the spiritualised land was both an Australian copy – a desirable postmodern quality – and a real, valued, honest source of relationship. It is still necessary to put aside the negative connotations of imitation and fabrication, as had Taylor had back in the early 1980s, even when they appear alongside something so apparently authentic as the bush, authentic precisely because, for white Australians, it is also always a landscape of dispossession.

Artist Ian North has more recently taken up Imants Tillers's initial suggestion of 'postAboriginality', carefully rebutting the paternalism and essentialist implications of the older term, 'Aboriginalism'.[23] This word had, North explained, been used in literary criticism as a parallel to the idea of orientalism to register a movement of fascination with Aboriginal culture and a denial of the right of Aboriginal people to speak on their own behalf. But 'postAboriginality' still sounds like it implies historical closure. So North coined the word 'starAboriginality', and – closely paraphrasing Ian North – we claim Davis as its exemplary artist, just as his work acknowledged Aboriginal values and art at a significant level of understanding, at the level of 'deep grammar', in North's words, and not as only stylistic signs. For the reasons outlined above, this is a difficult idea, since white Australian art regards Aboriginality as beyond the cultural pale, avoiding it out of a kind of courtesy while drawing deeply on the landscape's apparent presence and its colonised past.

BALGO

Towards the end of his life in 1997 John Davis delivered a speech at McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park about his journey to the outback in 1992 and his attempt to create an artist collaboration with Aboriginal people:

> My journey to Balgo began in the early 1990s when I felt that, since my art has primarily been based in the essence of the Australian landscape, specifically the dry arid areas of north west Victoria, then I should make some attempt to personally contact other Australian artists whose traditions extend back much further than mine in terms of Australian landscape and to perhaps move towards some kind of collaborative project. Gabrielle Pizzi suggested Balgo.[24]

Davis cared deeply about reconciliation with Aboriginal people, about the environment (without ever being a formal member of a conservation organisation), and about the possibility of cross-cultural exchange. He often observed that white Australia could never be at peace with itself without reconciliation.

Davis set off for Balgo in August 1992. He had gained Australia Council funding to assist him with the project and took three weeks' leave from the Victorian College of the Arts. He was hoping to meet Yagga Yagga artists. He imagined he might begin a dialogue with them, perhaps even an artistic collaboration that would be mutually beneficial, drawn from a shared interest in the landscape. He was also planning to make an installation in the bush, 'which will be destroyed or taken away after I have recorded it'. Before he left Davis carefully constructed and packed a school of sculpted fishes and pods made from papier-mâché and bitumen paint as well as the sewn canvas belts and pouches, familiar to us from works such as *Unrolled,* 1973, and *Flag renamed place*, 1981.

He flew to Alice Springs then drove alone along the Tanami Track. When he arrived at Balgo he could not interest anyone in working with him. His plan to meet artists didn't quite work out. Someone had recently died and everyone was away:

> Needless to say the collaborative project did not happen. The community has its own life and dynamic and a person who comes from a society of ever changing values and the pursuit of an idea for its own sake really has a peripheral role to play in such a society.

He bowed to the inevitable, quickly accepting the futility of engineering an exercise in cross-cultural art from scratch without all the preparation this entails. He had inadvertently recapitulated a succession of other white artists' quixotic previous attempts to meet and commune with Aboriginal artists – European performance artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay had attempted much the same thing on their first journey to Central Australia after the 1979 Sydney Biennale in which they had participated. They had been firmly told to go away, gaining permits only after working as assistants in the Central Land Council offices a year or two later. Even then they had found their expectations of cross-cultural dialogue continually rebuffed, at least until their utopian idealism had exhausted itself (after that, a long and interesting interaction that lasted for many years and spanned continents commenced).[25]

Davis wound his fishes and pods in their canvas jackets around trees at Sturt Creek, near Billiluna, in Western Australia. The location was near the Tanami Track, the route he was taking from Balgo. He wrapped three white trunks with his canvas sleeves, and two other trees with papier-mâché. Again he was stressing the number three, already familiar to us from *Place* and

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from his Venice installation. Again he wanted repetition, not mirroring or mimesis. He carefully documented all this in a series of glorious photographs. He titled the resulting work *Tree piece, Sturt Creek near Billiluna, North Western Australia*, 1992. He reused the sculptural props in his 1993 show at Heide. Though Davis's caption says 'mixed mediums, 48 inches high x 18 inches diameter', we should equally read his photographs like film stills, way-stops along a process.

This went well beyond archival recording. We know the importance that documentation and reproduction took in Davis's mind, later as well as earlier in his career. His photographs of *Tree piece*, 1973, had had a life in themselves as autonomous works in exhibitions. In 1975 he had exhibited photographs of his Hattah installations alongside his newer open-form sculptures. There was no sense of one as reproduction, the other as real. Both sculpture and document were equally close, not distant, in an unfolding process. Both were non-sites. And he had created such ambiguous images before: *Installation: Old camel trail, Saudi Arabia*, 1987, records one of the works that Davis completed while working on an Australian Embassy commission in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Extraneous to the commission, he took the works out to the desert, carefully positioned them, photographed the result, and then abandoned them to the elements. One of these photographs is on the cover of Ken Scarlett's definitive book on Davis. The commission from which these pieces were permanently subtracted is in the present exhibition, and should be read in the light of the work left on the Old Camel Trail: his 'discarded' works reversed the normal trajectory of art from the outside, the site or source, to the inside, the non-site.

Clearly, the documentation was as much an end point as the works themselves. Once more he was placing made images within an indifferent landscape; in other words, images appear to the viewer inside already coded images (for photographs are not transparent; as was outlined before, they are palimpsests). Culture is continuous with nature. This is the return of the non-site to the site and, like his earlier works, this art seeks the condition of document or archive. This was the key to Davis's contribution.

His desire to define time, place and space was as insistent and dominating in the early 1970s as it was by the end of the 1990s. In a diary entry for 8 May 1963 Davis had written: 'If I am to pursue these three things – truth, beauty and love – then I must define clearly what these things are'. He started and ended with these questions. John Davis's humble, kind inquiry always had a moral dimension.