The Provincialism Problem: Terry Smith and Centre-Periphery Art History

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By the early 1970s, art history's older models of professional competence, based on connoisseurship, the unpicking of iconography, the careful study of older European art and a hesitant introduction to the modern had been forever altered. This had been the basis of teaching in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Melbourne. Under inaugural Herald Professor Joseph Burke, the Fine Art Department's cosmopolitan perspective on art history emphasized the long art history of Europe, interpreting it through the twin tools of connoisseurship and Warburg's iconology and arriving at modern art only after considerable (and compulsory) preparation in art of much earlier periods. But under the impact of the newer but irreconcilable poles of formalism and Marxism, which were exerting considerable influence upon younger art historians, art critics and artists alike, the discipline of art history as well as the practice of art was changing. Until his appointment as professor at Sydney University's newly-established Power Institute, Bernard Smith had worked at the University of Melbourne. By the time he arrived in Sydney, Bernard Smith's late-humanist battle against what he had seen as American cultural imperialism had been well and truly lost.

Terry Smith had been taught by Bernard Smith (no family relation) while he studied Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne. He was to retain a complex intellectual and work connection with Bernard Smith for many years. In 1968, Terry Smith became a tutor in the Department of Art History at Sydney University, where Bernard Smith had shortly before been installed as the founding Director of the new Power Institute. As one of the most promising and busy young Australian art writers, Terry Smith was initially to follow the trajectory set in Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting*, seeking to locate Australian art in relation to international (which was for him as much as Patrick McCaughey, whose writing we discussed earlier, American) art: young writers in the late 1960s were convinced that the centre of world art was now New York. This shift in imperial power did not, however, diminish the constant Australian preoccupation with nation and national identity. Rather, it was to result in the essay by which Terry Smith became best-known in Australia, 'The Provincialism Problem' (1974).[1] But though the increasingly

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[1] Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 1 (September 1974), 54–9; reprinted in *Malasartes*, no. 1 (Oct.-Nov. 1975, included by an editorial collective including Brazilian conceptualist artist Cildo Meireles without Smith's knowledge or permission alongside Joseph Kosuth's earlier articles, 'Art as Idea as Idea', which had originally been published in the London-based *Studio International* in 1969; Rio de Janeiro-based *Malasartes* was the first conceptual art journal in South America); Paul Taylor (ed), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970–1980* (Melbourne: Art & Text, 1984), 46–53; Rex Butler (ed), *What is Appropriation: An Anthology of Critical Writings on Australian Art in the '80s*

politicised atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s did entangle art with the highly charged issues of the day, not least the Vietnam War, this presented young critics with a dilemma: how were they reconcile their understanding—that America was a hegemon—with the lure of New York, the awareness that the city presented the most extraordinary concentration of the most progressive new art in the world.

From 1972 until 1974, Terry Smith was a Harkness Fellow in New York. The Harkness Fellowships were administered by a New York-based philanthropic trust, the Commonwealth Fund, which had been founded by a Standard Oil heiress. The fellowships had long been the avenue through which exceptional, young Australian scholars, artists and writers could cap off their studies in the United States (though unfortunately, since 1997, the Fund has limited its activities to health-related projects). The scheme had been designed to duplicate, in the United States, the success of the Rhodes Scholarships in the United Kingdom. Australian painters Sidney Nolan and Brett Whiteley, and Melbourne critic Patrick McCaughey, had been granted previous Harkness Fellowships. Nolan spent the late 1950s working out his Gallipoli series in a New York studio, in between peripatetic roadtrips across the continent. Smith's decision to focus on academic study and to immerse himself in the New York avant-garde was quite different; he was no cultural tourist.

Excerpts from the diary that Terry Smith kept during his time in New York highlight the intense response that the crumbling underside of the city elicited in many visitors. Smith's first, horrified written reaction to New York was visceral: 'The Bowery sidewalk is appalling.' [2] He was referring to the deprivations suffered by Bowery bums outside the walk-up apartment where he was staying with artist Mel Ramsden. Smith described the terrible physical state of the homeless and commented, 'the contrast with the intellectualization of the Art-Language work is extreme, going on inside the door two flights up.' [3] On the following day, Saturday 9 September 1972, he wrote, 'Noland has a studio less than 100 yards away', Smith indignantly asked, 'how can he paint like he does with the Bowery going on directly outside?' [4] This was a world away from Patrick McCaughey's New York, a couple of years earlier. McCaughey had commented as little on politics as on the emerging conceptualist art in 'Notes on the Centre: New York' (1970) and, decades later, in his memoir, *The Bright Shapes and the True Names* (2003), he remembered that 'New York was warm, dusty and green', and certainly not appalling. [5] McCaughey's and Terry

Smith's attitudes to academia were also very different. Perhaps understandably, McCaughey thought that it was 'unreal' of the Harkness administrators to think that he would sit in lectures and seminars 'when all New York beckoned', so nothing came of the 'waffle' (his own, overly self-deprecating words), by which he meant the 'hare-brained' academic project he proposed.[6] Terry Smith, by contrast, agonised over the direction of his research, studiously slaved over his typewriter and by 5 December 1972 was able to write:

> It's nice to reflect that since being here, apart from all the work put in visiting galleries, reading interesting texts and having good discussions, that I've managed to get pretty thoroughly into my paper for Goldwater on de Kooning's Picasso sources (to break through levels of generality that I have rarely broken through at home in my meagre art historical writings) and that I have nearly completed a long essay on art and ethics, something I had projected myself as doing only towards the end of my stay here.[7]

The long essay he refers to was part of his Master of Arts thesis, 'American Abstract Expressionism: Ethical Attitudes and Moral Function', which was to win him the University Medal at the University of Sydney in 1976. Terry Smith enrolled at the Institute of Fine Arts (IFA), New York University (NYU) and then began work on his thesis.[8] His principal academic mentor, Robert Goldwater was a renowned scholar and authority on Cubism. Smith also encountered the great scholar, Meyer Schapiro, famous for his socially progressive views as well as his openness to new art, and was appropriately awed. When Smith visited the Museum of Modern Art, he was overwhelmed:

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least you know you won't get hurt, or robbed, or even importuned if you march right on straight ahead, eyes front, going about your business' (Terry Smith, diary entry, Saturday 9 September 1972).

[6] Patrick McCaughey, *Bright Shapes*: 108.

[7] Terry Smith, diary entry, 5 December 1972.

[8] Smith's Masters thesis topic was 'American Abstract Expressionism: ethical attitudes and moral function'; his coursework teachers were Professors Goldwater, Rosenblum and Rubin; he enrolled in an additional unit, 'Art History: Theories and Methods' at Columbia University taught by Meyer Schapiro, perhaps the first course in the US to study visual semiotics. Robert Goldwater was Smith's mentor in the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University; his doctoral students had included Max Kozloff, Barbara Rose, and Lucy Lippard; Max Kozloff recalled that Goldwater's 'natural medium was silence, but when provoked, he was never at a loss for a negative word' (Newman, *Challenging Art*, 27); Michael Fried recalled that Goldwater was 'a terrific teacher' (Newman, *Challenging Art*, 71). Robert Rosenblum was a Professor of Fine Arts at New York University from 1967 onwards; at that point, his books included *Cubism, and Twentieth Century Art* (1960), *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (1967), *Frank Stella* (1971) and he was about to publish the influential *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (1975); Frank Stella and Michael Fried had been amongst Rosenblum's students at Princeton University in the mid-1950s. William Rubin was American art editor of *Art International* in the early 1960s, until 1964, a professor of art history in the Graduate Division of New York University, and most importantly, the chief curator of painting of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from 1968 until 1973; he became the extremely powerful and opinionated Director of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA in 1973. Smith took coursework units from Rubin and Rosenblum; his work in progress was also read by Lawrence Alloway, Irving Sandler and Max Kosloff. All in all, this was a star-studded group of teachers.

> All I saw was *Guernica*, a huge black, white and gray, superb painting—and the 1949 Pollock *One* simply and literally knocked me backwards, speechless onto a sofa-thing, where I sat stunned for I don't know how long.[9]

Patrick McCaughey's recollection of his first visit, a couple of years previously, to the Museum of Modern Art is of a remarkably similar reaction to somewhat different paintings. First, he visited the summer show, 'First Generation Abstract Expressionists'. 'This', he wrote, 'was the painting of my time and it sang as well as spoke to me'.[10] He continued:

> I became intoxicated with the post-impressionist and early twentieth-century masterpieces, Cézanne's *Nude Bather*, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*. By the time I rounded the corner and saw Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, I was overcome, and like William Blake's Thel 'with a shriek / Fell back unhindered' and ran from the museum.[11]

On 5 November 1972, Terry Smith wrote 'Notes of a Cultural Tourist', an autobiographical fragment written to send back to Australia.[12] This account of his first days in New York was intended for publication in an unspecified magazine, and it makes a useful comparison with Patrick McCaughey's equally public, equally self-conscious report. Terry Smith began, 'Art in New York is about the least striking thing about New York for the newcomer. The city swamps you'.[13] McCaughey had declared that, 'Since 1940 New York can justifiably claim to join the select list of the great centres of western art'. That is, New York was on a pedestal and art was the reason for its position there.[14] Terry Smith wrote about the difficulty he had coping with the dysfunctional, decaying city and the impact that this had on the way he looked at and considered art. He commented, 'It was no accident that Robbe-Grillet, in his *Project for a Revolution in New York,* chose rape of body and mind as his central image for New York'.[15]

The city may have been grim, dirty and dangerous, but if it was an extraordinarily exciting time anywhere in the world to be involved in the new forms of art that Smith had charted in Sydney, it was especially so in New York. He spent time with conceptual artists Joseph Kosuth, Mel Ramsden and Ian Burn, all active members of the Art and Language collective, noting on 10 December 1972 that, 'Joseph and Mel first laid it on me to join A-L, or something like that, soon after I arrived'.[16] The New York chapter of Art and Language, for all the visual austerity and declamatory iconoclasm of its publications, was but one of very many

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9 Terry Smith, diary entry, 9 September 1972.
10 McCaughey, *Bright Shapes*, 108.
11 McCaughey, *Bright Shapes*, 108.
12 Terry Smith, 'Notes of a Cultural Tourist (Nov. 5 1972)', diary entry, 5 November 1972.
13 Terry Smith, 'Notes of a Cultural Tourist (Nov. 5 1972)', diary entry, 5 November 1972, 1.
14 Patrick McCaughey, 'Notes on the Centre', 76.
15 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Project for a Revolution in New York,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1972). French author, literary theoretician, and representative of the *nouveau roman* (the new novel), Alain Robbe-Grillet produced novels from recurring images, impersonally described physical objects and impassive recordings of the random events of everyday life.
16 Terry Smith, diary entry, 10 December 1972.

manifestations, by then, of the reaction against the teleological and authoritarian manner of Greenberg's supposedly self-evident modernist narrative, a narrative that Smith's NYU teachers—members of an older generation—had leaned towards to different degrees. This late modernist mainstream remained associated with leftist and liberal humanist causes but had by this point managed to become both aesthetically prescriptive: effectively and apolitically it had become the new establishment. By the time Smith arrived in New York (indeed, by the time McCaughey arrived in New York), it had long since been clear to artists, from the minimalists to conceptualists, that the 'Modernist *protocol*' [Art and Language member and the group's resident art historian, Charles Harrison's term for discourse] was 'manipulative, bureaucratic and univocal'.[17] This modern protocol was inextricably linked to the political rhetoric of the Cold War that had polarised international affairs into a battle between good and evil. Modernist art criticism, especially that written by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, described 'art' and 'the aesthetic' from a Kantian aesthetic perspective, effectively proscribing impure artistic styles such as Dada or surrealism and as well, of course, regarding new art produced outside New York as provincial. An analysis of the politics of exclusion and purity had been one of the main focuses of conceptual art, rather romantically described by one of Terry Smith's new friends in Art and Language as 'the nameless art of the culturally displaced.'[18] Looking backwards in 1996, Mel Ramsden referred to New Yorkers' imperial assumptions about quality (of which a corollary was that art from elsewhere was provincial) as one of the important dogmas that Art and Language wished to combat after its initial phases during the 1960s. Its Australian expatriate members did fight on this turf in several key essays published during the period, not least in Ian Burn's 1973 essay, 'Provincialism', published in an Australian small circulation journal, *Art Dialogue*, in Terry Smith's 'Provincialism Problem' (1974) and, finally, in Burn's later *Artforum* feature, written just before he returned home to Australia, 'Art Market, Affluence and Degradation' (1975).[19] In 'Provincialism', Burn teased out the idea that context is ideological and then asserted: 'It is especially important, if obvious, not to assume that one's activity is neutral on ideological grounds. Accepted norms of behaviour may appear neutral simply because they are the accepted standards.'[20]

That small, short-lived journal, *Art Dialogue*, was linked to New York Art & Language through Ian Burn, and was part of the emergence of an Art & Language outpost in Australia. Two issues of *Art Dialogue* were produced, one in October 1973 and the other in October 1974. A dry, image-free pamphlet, *Art Dialogue*'s audience was always going to be tiny but, interestingly enough, it was published with the

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[17] Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 31.

[18] Mel Ramsden, 'Ian Burn's Excellent Adventure' in Anne Stephen (ed.), *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn* (Melbourne: Power Publications and Monash University Gallery, 1996), 23.

[19] Ian Burn, 'Provincialism', *Art Dialogue*, no. 1 (October 1973), 3-11; Ian Burn, 'Art Market, Affluence and Degradation' (1975), reprinted in Amy Baker Sandback (ed.), *Looking Critically: 21 Years of Artforum* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I., 1984), 173-177; Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, vol. 13, no. 1 (September 1974), 54-59; see also the chapter, 'The provincialism debates', in Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether, Ann Stephen, *The Necessity of Australian Art* (Sydney: Power Institute, University of Sydney, 1988), 104-126.

[20] Burn, 'Provincialism', 4.

support of the newly established Visual Arts Board (VAB) of the Australia Council for the Arts through its first round of funding, indicating the Board's intention from its inception to recognize art writing as well as art practice.[21] The VAB made two grants to the editor, George Collin: it first offered him $200 to 'publish magazine on modern art' and a year later, a further $1,000 'subsidy for one year's publication of biannual journal *Art Dialogue*.'[22] In that same 1974-75 funding round, Ian Burn also received a grant, to 'assist publication of two books on the conceptual nature of art.'[23] Both issues of *Art Dialogue* mimicked Art & Language's New York publications such as *Blurting in A & L* and *The Fox*. That is, they were all printed on cheap paper in what looked like the most anonymous typeface; they had soft, cheap-looking covers—*Blurting* has a paper cover—and there were either no images or very few.[24]

Art Dialogue's editor, Melbourne artist George Collin, editorialized that it was a 'journal reflecting certain developments in recent theory of art and serving as a forum for art conversation of dialectical character.'[25] The contents of the first issue demonstrated the close link with Art & Language in New York and London: the lead editorial by Collin; 'Provincialism' by Ian Burn; 'A Role for Theory' by George Collin; 'Linguistic Devaluation of Art' by Andrew Menard, the A & L artist living in New York; and 'Art, Work and Ethics' by Peter Smith, an English artist connected to U. K. Art & Language.[26] George Collin began the editorial by defining particular developments in the recent theory of art:

> The definition might begin by saying that the traditional 'visual' character of 'visual art' cannot be understood except through some set of ideological canons or conceptual schemes. Thus, visual art can be seen as necessarily 'theory laden' with the context of visual art subject to controversy.[27]

He went on to say that this definition was both too general and too specific but it was important, not least because 'there is no split between art and the ideology of art'. The material in the magazine could therefore have be read as philosophy or art

[21] This is also a pointer to the participation of Ian Burn, who was alert for funding support. The Visual Arts Board (VAB) had been established in 1973 as one of seven constituent Boards of the newly chartered Australian Council for the Arts. The VAB assumed some of the functions of the former Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, but not those relating to acquisitions for the Australian National Gallery. Its main responsibilities lay in the general fields of painting, sculpture, photography, industrial design, architecture, art education and the conservation of art works. See *Australia Council for the Arts First Annual Report January–December 1973* for further information about the establishment of the VAB.

[22] *Australian Council for the Arts First Annual Report January–December 1973*: 190; *Australian Council for the Arts Second Annual Report January–December 1974*: 143.

[23] *Australian Council for the Arts Second Annual Report*: 143.

[24] Alexander Alberro describes *The Fox* as 'printed on newspaper of the lowest quality, its covers were grainy cardboard set in Copperplate gothic and lacked any clear markings to indicate the journal was related to art, and it rarely contained images' (Alexander Alberro, 'One Year Under the Mast', *Artforum* (Summer 2003): 162–64 & 206, 162).

[25] George Collin, 'Editorial', *Art Dialogue* 1 (October 1973): 1-2, 1.

[26] The information about the writers is taken from the magazine's 'Notes on Contributors', *Art Dialogue* 1 (October 1973). Andrew Menard was a second generation conceptual artist; he participated in *The Annotations* project with Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden, Terry Smith and others, and was also on the editorial board of *The Fox*.

[27] Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 1 (October 1973): 1.

criticism, and at the same time as art. Collin then made the statement that indicated the little magazine's lofty aims: 'it is anticipated that the educational or heuristic potential of such discussion is high.'[28] That is, the magazine aimed to teach readers to understand or unmask the ideology of art, or to give them access to material that would allow them to discover it for themselves. Collin considered this aspect of the magazine was particularly important in Australia where 'dialogue in depth barely exists', so the magazine was to 'develop a dialectic with 'normal art' [undefined].'[29] Further, the magazine would also be an 'open forum for other, perhaps more general art dialogue.' Art magazines of the 1970s often aspired to be this open forum, and this implied that existing magazines and newspapers would not publish what these writers wanted to say. The openness of the forum did not extend far beyond the views of the editors. They were interested in responses to their views but were not at all interested in 'general art dialogue', for *Art Dialogue*'s contributions were to be assessed 'for the dialectical possibilities inherent in the work.' In conclusion and quite accurately, Collin wrote that it was not certain that a printed magazine was the best way to develop 'a framework reflecting our pragmatics and context' so 'it would be better understood if the journal as such is regarded as *experimental* in relation to the above aims.'[30]

At the most superficial level, the editorial seemed to spend a lot of words saying very little. The terminology was daunting: words like ideological canons, conceptual schemes, dogmatism, theorization, problematics, dialectics, frameworks and pragmatics. The reader arrived at the end of this difficult piece to discover that the editor was not even sure that the magazine was a good idea. Or perhaps the notion of an experiment explained why the editor did not seem to know what he meant. The editorial was reminiscent of an equally dense *Other Voices* editorial that had similarly used the rhetoric of inclusion to exclude many potential readers and contributors. Liberal use of terms such as 'problematics', 'dialectics' and 'pragmatics' was sure to alienate many readers and to close down the access to any 'open forum.' The predominance of articles written overseas, combined with the didactic editorial tone, whether intentional or unintentional, indicated that this magazine was meant for specialist readers who were already acquainted with 'conceptual schemes' of art, especially those of Art & Language.

The second issue of *Art Dialogue* was published in October 1974. It contained articles that were, if anything, more uncompromising than the contents of the first issue. Young Melbourne artist Jeff Stewart, then a student at the Prahran College of Advanced Education and to become increasingly prominent in the small conceptualist art world in Melbourne, contributed 'Some Thoughts on Art', and the presence of an essay by British artist John Stezaker, contributing editor of *Frameworks*, a journal 'of similar aims' to *Art Dialogue*, continued the inclusion of writers from off-shore. Collin's editorial was a more focused exercise in self-definition, refining *Art Dialogue*'s intended relation to other Australian art magazines. The editorial began with a mission statement: 'to publish the conversation of our art community', particularly 'discussion that is unusual to other

[28] Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 1 (October 1973): 1.
[29] Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 1 (October 1973): 1.
[30] Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 1 (October 1973): 2.

Australian art magazines' because they have 'generic limits which to some extent leave unclarified other problems in art, such as concerns principally of conversational or cognitive value', echoing the discursive aims of Art & Language.[31] That is, such art works were often simply records of discussions that had taken place, presented as a means to stimulate yet further discussion. As Art & Language theoretician Charles Harrison recalled, the aim was transdisciplinary, to 'relax the intellectual closures applied around 'art' and 'history' and 'the aesthetic', and thus to question that authority which constituted culture in its own image.'[32] The artists aimed to collapse the distinction between art theory and art, and between art writer and artist. The obscurity and jargon noted above was a tool as much as it was mannerism. Defending the claim that *Art-Language* was ineffective because unreadable, Charles Harrison retrospectively commented that Michael Baldwin intentionally wrote material that was 'resistant to paraphrase...in order to render Art and Language material unamenable to co-option by the manipulative and managerial discourses of the culture.'[33]

Having asserted the same, very substantial difference from 'established magazines', the second *Art Dialogue* editorial went on to distance itself from the word 'conceptual' in its then-current use:

> Particularly with the use of it in this country by, for example, Sydney's late Inhibodress gallery, Melbourne's current Pinacotheca gallery, the *Nation Review* newspaper and the Contemporary Art Society's federal *Broadsheet*. Perhaps in danger of doing injustice to a few artists, this magazine might criticise popular Conceptualism in Australia as a little undergraduate and too much a product of the *laissez faire* character of recent art in our community. We should use this magazine to publish checks for such artwork. Our criticisms need not be out of repudiation but to interrupt far less epidermal works that tend to spoil 'conceptual' as an art term.[34]

George Collin had now effectively excluded the whole Australian art world. Not yet satisfied, he went on to say that the first editorial had been misunderstood as 'only inviting so-called academic comment by *de jure* theoreticians' and this had limited the magazine as a forum. Now he wanted to clarify that all members of the art community were invited to participate 'including those normally not considered as within the discipline of art.'[35] Perhaps the editorial was an example of the Art & Language practice of working through a topic and publishing the process, though the result was indistinguishable from confused prose—a risky tactic. The editorial concluded:

[31] George Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 2 (October 1974): 1.

[32] Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language*: 19.

[33] Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language*: 117.

[34] Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 2 (October 1974): 1.

[35] Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 2 (October 1974): 1.

> The experimental, polemical and open-ended situation is one to take advantage of. In sympathy with this it is expected that editorial policy will change as the magazine discovers its uses in relation to our art community.[36]

This was the magazine's last issue. Terry Smith recalled that Jeff Stewart, one of *Art Dialogue*'s founders and a young artist Smith later encountered again at Philip Institute, when he returned to Australia and taught at the new art school, wanted 'more direct involvement with working class politics' and had 'increasing doubts about the efficacy of the level of theory'.[37] Others, especially Smith himself and Melbourne artist John Nixon, then involved with this group and whose later, highly eclectic paintings were to remain irrevocably marked by this early phase in his career, were committed to the desire for praxis that drove *Art Dialogue*.

The last item in the second issue of *Art Dialogue* was a photocopy of a letter addressed to George Collin from the editors of *The Fox*. It announced a 'new publishing effort' in New York, to be edited by Sarah Charlesworth, Michael Corris, Preston Heller, Joseph Kosuth, Andrew Menard and Mel Ramsden, all members of Art & Language New York (ALNY). *The Fox* was partly an expression of the increasingly strained relations between ALNY and the founding Art and Language group in England (ALUK). Artist Joseph Kosuth had been New York editor of *Art-Language*, the UK-based Art and Language journal, but decided that 'we had to break from England. It was just silly for Michael Baldwin and other members of Art and Language [there] to try to control what was happening in New York.'[38]

Art Dialogue's publication of the letter was evidence of the close connection with Art and Language New York, a connection maintained through Ian Burn who, Terry Smith noted in his diary entry, was in fact editing *Art Dialogue* with Mel Ramsden by long-distance from New York.[39] *Art Dialogue* exemplified *The Fox*'s aim to incorporate material from outside New York, for *The Fox*'s 'focus is not limited to our historical location within institutions in New York.'[40] *The Fox* had been founded, at least in part, out of the continuing importance of the themes of provincialism and power to ALNY participants.[41] Ian Burn and Terry Smith thought that the art world was dominated by New Yorkers who should, they were to argue, should take moral responsibility for allowing 'outsiders' in.[42] Joseph Kosuth thought that Art & Language was dominated by the English. ALUK thought that ALNY was trying to take over Art & Language.[43] And *Art Dialogue* was, first, an editorial model of globalization in action and, second, a clear case of the desire of artists to strain against and break the discursive boundaries that contained them as artists, and

[36] Collin, Editorial, *Art Dialogue* 2 (October 1974): 2.

[37] Terry Smith, email letter to Heather Barker, 18 August 2005.

[38] Joseph Kosuth quoted in Alexander Alberro, 'One Year Under the Mast', *Artforum Artforum* (Summer 2003): 162–64 & 206, 162.

[39] Terry Smith, diary entry, 19 May 1973: 'George Collins [sic] and John Nixon in Australia with their A & L ambitions—Ian and Mel taking over the silent editorship of their magazine, behind the scenes.'

[40] Letter from *The Fox's* editors addressed to George Collin, reproduced in *Art Dialogue* 2, (October 1974): 37.

[41] For an analysis of the presence of the themes of distance and location in early conceptual art works, including those of Burn, Ramsden and Kosuth, see chapters 1 and 2 of Green's *The Third Hand*.

[42] See Ian Burn, 'Provincialism' (1973) and Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem' (1974).

[43] See Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language*, especially 'The Conditions of Problems', 82–128.

contained their discourse as art theory. This was what the talk about an open forum was really about, and this was why the participants were so fiercely and grimly determined to police this openness.

Meanwhile, Smith had been assisting the group with Art and Language works. By mid-1973 he was participating in the *Annotations* project, which led in turn to their collective work, *Handbook: Blurting in A & L*, 1973, and A & L exhibitions in Europe and at John Weber Gallery, in New York. He was to be co-editor of the September 1974 issue of *Art-Language*. In other words, he was crossing the line between art writer and artist, as had Burn and Ramsden from the opposite direction some years before.

Terry Smith's association with the members of Art and Language brought him into contact with the immensely powerful New York art magazine, *Artforum*, through an introduction from British expatriate critic Lawrence Alloway (who had been reading Smith's IFA thesis). *Artforum*'s new editor, John Coplans, challenged Smith to write an article on conceptual art for the magazine.[44] This became 'Art and Art and Language' and appeared in the February 1974 issue, having become, with the understandable encouragement of his Art and Language friends, an essay on that collective and its hybrid concept of artistic work.[45] At the time, *Artforum* was the most influential art magazine in the world, and Terry Smith was touchingly but understandably 'bowled over' when he visited John Coplans to discover 'my name is on a separate folder in a rack behind Coplans' desk at *Artforum*—incredible!'[46] John Coplans, activist, politically aware and always an outsider (qualities that eventually led to a rebellion by the magazine's advertisers and his removal by the publishers), may have been sympathetic to the problems faced by provincial artists because of his own tough South African origin, British boarding school education and his experience as an artist and a critic. After leaving art criticism he gradually attained, late in life, widespread recognition for his own art: austere, tightly cropped black and white photographs, often extreme close-ups, of his ageing, misshapen, white male body.[47] In *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974*, Coplans remembered *Artforum* before it relocated to New York:

> You have to remember that in California there was nothing comparative at this time to the East Coast, to its libraries, its universities, its schools of art history, spread virtually from Washington through to Boston and, say, from Chicago eastwards. We were isolated on the West Coast. The number of institutions was very small. Almost all the prominent German art historians had come into New York. So there was an incredible richness in the East, and we were poverty stricken in comparison. Regional, provincial, poverty

[44] *Artforum* was founded in San Francisco in 1962 by Philip Leider (editor, 1962–71), John Coplans (editor, 1971–4) and John Irwin (publisher). The magazine moved to Los Angeles in 1965 and then to New York in 1967.
[45] Terry Smith, 'Art and Art and Language', *Artforum*, vol. 11, no. 6 (February 1974), 49-52.
[46] Terry Smith, diary entry, 22 April 1974.
[47] John Coplans' childhood was spent travelling between England and South Africa and, from the age of eighteen, he spent eight years (1938–46) in the army. He went to San Francisco from London in 1960. He was born in 1920, so he was 53 or 54 years old when Terry Smith met him in New York.

stricken in comparison. Whatever resources we had, we put together and fed off each other in every way that was possible.[48]

If California was 'regional, provincial, poverty stricken' in the early 1960s, what would he have said about Sydney and Melbourne? However, it is unrealistic to think that Coplans was motivated by simple altruism. James Monte, painter and one of the founding editors of *Artforum*, remarked of Coplans:

> I love John, John's terrific. But he's not terribly sensitive. John, I have to keep saying to myself, had a brigade of Africans in Asia in the Second World War. I mean this is a very tough guy. You don't do that and remain sane and alive unless you're a very tough guy, and he is.[49]

Coplans's wartime experiences had placed him way beyond an insular American perspective, and he understood the international impact of US Cold War politics and culture. He was a hard-headed operator. And he had little desire at all to confirm either modernist or more conservative establishment hierarchies. The issue of provincialism was, therefore, going to interest John Coplans and the more engaged readership of *Artforum*. And such interests, which boiled over in his publication of essays on Cold War politics and CIA funding of the visual arts, would lead, of course, to his abrupt departure under publisher pressure from *Artforum*.

Coplans published Smith's landmark article, 'The Provincialism Problem' in *Artforum* in 1974 when Smith had been living in New York for two years and after his first piece for Artforum, a fairly polemical, partisan essay on Art & Language. 'The Provincialism Problem' is worth unpacking for its thesis, for the process by which it was written, and for the tensions that it could not resolve. Its publication was a recognition of the fact that conceptualist, ideas-based art was being made in many cities around the world as well as in New York: conceptualism, Smith was presciently asserting, was a global movement.[50] In 'The Provincialism Problem', he explored the nature of provincialism in its many forms. Despite what we have just said, it was not an optimistic essay. He adopted a bleak determinism summed up in the sentence, '*as the situation stands, the provincial artist cannot choose not to be provincial*' [Smith's emphasis].[51] The tenor was familiar from other Art and Language texts: blunt, matter of fact, Marxist-inflected and almost Frankfurt School in its take-no-prisoners, depressive bleakness. Smith, along with the founders of Art & Language, believed that pointing out the often hidden operations of cultural oppression within the art world—according to them a network saturated by what the then-fashionable 1960s Marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse was identifying as 'repressive tolerance'—was a necessary but not sufficient condition for political

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[48] John Coplans, interview, Newman, *Challenging Art*, 27.
[49] James Monte, interview, Newman, *Challenging Art*, 310.
[50] Years later, Smith was to contribute the Australian and New Zealand coverage of international conceptualism in the ground-breaking survey, Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s, exh. cat, curated by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999); Smith's essay ('Peripheries in motion: Conceptualism and conceptual art in Australia and New Zealand', 97-98) was to focus on the artists that we discussed in the previous chapter.
[51] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 117.

action within art circles: Smith later said, 'The goal was to provoke those concerned (artists in this case) into angry resistance, to invent new modes of 'going-on.'[52] If they imagined that defeatism was neither their tone nor their mood, then even they acknowledged that the possibility of success, let alone escape, from even benign cultural dominance was limited. The only, very small chance that escape might be possible was in the unlikely event, he imagined, that the metropolitan centre, in this case New York, changed its hegemonic ways. Terry Smith shifted the responsibility for provincialism onto New York artists and critics rather than the colonized—a very important insight—concluding the article on a distinctly geopolitical note.

Smith defined provincialism as 'an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values'.[53] We would now recognize this as a description of hegemony in action. 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, rich, confident North American cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles, as provincial. This 'almost universally shared construction of reality' became a 'problematic relevant to all of us.'[54] In this context he set out to explore the parallel patterns of provincialism in a particular case study, Australian art, thus introducing a range of younger Australian artists to a North American audience.

His next major point—one that was to considerably influence the next two generations of Australian scholars from Paul Taylor and Rex Butler to Edward Colless and myself—was that models and prototypes are usually discovered in their mature form and often in reproduction: 'They seem to issue, as it were, directly out of art, to be made by 'cultural heroes', and to take their predestined place as one of a succession of 'great moments' in art history.'[55] This statement emerged from Terry Smith's background within the productivist method of writing art history that emphasised great men and the march of history combined with the concept of 'Art'. In Smith's Hobbesian view, models and prototypes enter art communities that have been 'formed by relentless provincialism', in which the 'defiant urge to localism' (one that we identified already in Bernard Smith) was combined with 'reluctant recognition that the generative innovations in art and the criteria for standards are determined externally' (the reality that Donald Brook had also described).[56] The result was provincial art.

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 discursive 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. In fact, at the time Smith wrote 'Provincialism Problem', the attitudes of Australians themselves to the problem of marginalisation and isolation was contradictory. If Terry Smith's

[52] Terry Smith, e-mail letter to the author, June 2009.
[53] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 113.
[54] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 113.
[55] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 114.
[56] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 114.

generation of artists and art writers wished to fight the constrictions imposed by provincialism—for reasons that were as political as they were artistic—then an older generation, and even many younger artists and critics, was prepared at that point, in 1974, to embrace being provincial as a badge of honour. After all, in 1958, the Menzies federal government chose a selection of Arthur Streeton's turn-of-the-century landscapes to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. That year, Mark Rothko's sombre, abstract paintings represented the USA. Prime Minister Menzies and his art advisers made a deeply conservative choice in conscious defiance of the organizers' desire for contemporary art. The response to Streeton's old-fashioned paintings was so disdainful, historian Sarah Scott recounts, that the advisory committee, a group of old cultural apparatchiks who had been on the Commonwealth Advisory Board for decades, decided that Australia should withdraw from participation in future Venice Biennales. They reasoned, says Scott, that, if Australia represented itself as contemporary, then it would be indistinguishable from anywhere else.[57] Streeton looked anachronistic and so, in the same setting, would many highly valued Sydney and Melbourne artists. But why should this have mattered? What was wrong with provincialism, if its citizens believe that homegrown quality matters? Conservative critics often assert that provincial art is unfairly excluded from national and international artistic forums such as the Venice Biennales.[58] This self-serving argument rested on an elision of the fact that populist conservatism had been the hegemonic force dominating most of Australia's institutional art history and patronage, and this era was only just beginning to pass when Smith wrote his essay. Episodes when a conservative vision of art had not ruled state galleries, for example, had been relatively few, but the perennial populist problem remained for those state gallery directors to find younger, conservative artistic heroes of any quality at all. For various reasons, they were very hard to locate. Inversely, the reason that subsequent Australian governments chose to reverse Menzies' decision—Australia only exhibited again at Venice in 1978, four years after 'The Provincialism Problem' was published—was that they recognized that something more real than homespun pride is at stake in the way a provincial nation-state presented itself to the world. If Australia presented itself as contemporary, progressive and open to change—much as Cold War America had projected itself through the Museum of Modern Art's International Program in exhibitions such as 'Two Decades of American Painting' (which toured to Kyoto, New Delhi, Melbourne and Sydney in 1967) which we looked at earlier—then it was able to participate in the equivalent of a variety of cultural Olympics. When Australia withdrew from that international circuit, it was not playing in the cultural Olympiads, like other wealthy, influential nations such as the USA. Yet this is precisely what the determinedly provincial Menzies had decided.

Artistic and political populists had often assumed that it does not matter how other nations thought of Australia, and that there would be no negative consequences if the nation was seen as a place of provincial, homegrown pastoralists.

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[57] Sarah Russell Scott, *The politics of patronage : Australian art for export 1953-1964*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Melbourne, Department of Art History, Classics, Cinema Studies and Archaeology, 2005.

[58] See Giles Auty, 'Secret judges' business', *The Weekend Australian*, 8 April, 1999; John McDonald, 'The Australian landscape in visionary's eyes', *Sydney Morning Herald Spectrum*, 10 September 1994, 15A.

But producers of raw materials are marginal and vulnerable, even in the less globalized world economy of the 1970s, and provincials are ultimately always ignored or mocked. Cultural and political provincialism risks exclusion. But at the same time, the aspiration to international visibility meant art still had to 'funnel through New York' to achieve real success.[59] New York had retained this power by 'writing the rules of the game in avant-gardist terms', remaining 'the sole judge of who gets to play, of how one plays, and of who wins.'[60] The provincial artist must break into this game to be internationally successful, but would do this with a limited understanding of its intricacies and no way at all of influencing its core precepts and standards. As Smith wrote, 'the most the provincial artist can aspire to is to be considered second-rate'.[61] Smith's dismal conclusion was that the provincial artist was condemned to provinciality. Implicitly, so were provincial art historians and art critics.

This bleak situation was made worse by the unwritten but strict hierarchy within the New York art world that empowered some artists to be '*rule-generating* creators.' [62] Smith's very interesting emphasis had its origins within Thomas S. Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962), a controversial, widely circulated and influential book on scientific paradigms and change that was attracting readers in the art world (it had just been reprinted); Kuhn's name appears at the start of Smith's February 1974 *Artforum* essay, 'Art and Art and Language.'[63] These rule-generating artists generated new problems that other artists would then explore. The system was structured so that, every few years, artists who became cultural heroes 'break the bind' and are 'catalytic to the system's self-perpetuation'.[64] Smith's sociology of change and the art world was indebted to theories of scientific innovation, and most of all to Kuhn's scientific paradigm theory. Kuhn's thesis, that 'scientific revolutions are inaugurated by a growing sense, again often restricted to a narrow subdivision of the scientific community, that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately . . . In both political and scientific development the sense of malfunction that can lead to crisis is prerequisite to revolution', seemed to perfectly describe the new work undertaken by conceptualist artists.[65] Terry Smith was also still relying on Bernard Smith's ideas about dependency, principally Smith's assertion that the provincial artist always works at a time lapse behind the centre. These were ideas that Terry Smith had first used in his 1970 essay, 'Color-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–1970', the essay that we discussed earlier. There was a possible solution to these problems. And it must be remembered that, no matter how totally depressing the situation painted by Smith, that he believed that the basis of a 'solution' lay in ethical action. Smith cited Ian Burn's essay, 'Provincialism' (which had been written with Mel Ramsden in 1973) and 'Art is what we do, culture is what we do to other artists' (1973), to raise the ethical issue of the 'responsibilities of

[59] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 114.
[60] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 115.
[61] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 116.
[62] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 118.
[63] Terry Smith, 'Art and Art and Language', *Artforum*, vol. 11, no. 6 (February 1974), 49-52, 49; Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
[64] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 119.
[65] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962): 92.

American artists and their critical supporters'.[66] He suggested that American cultural institutions that exported American art through their international programs, such as the Museum of Modern Art, should acknowledge the fact of cultural imperialism and ensure that their exhibitions were not based on assumed superiority or condescension. Critics should not 'give a systematic, homogenised immutability to the development of an artist's work.'[67] Artists should not allow their works to be used to promote provincialism. Quite a wish list, and one that was not going to be met, no more than the Museum of Modern Art had bowed to the demands of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) in 1969 to completely transform its dealing with artists and its exhibition program, and no more than the Guggenheim Museum would back away from its notorious 1971 cancellation of a Hans Haacke exhibition, despite widespread artist protests. Smith's article ended with the reminder that 'there are no ideologically neutral cultural acts'.[68]

What made this a landmark article for the readers of *Artforum*? First, the fact of it. Terry Smith, a provincial critic, had managed to write an article criticizing the New York (the metropolitan) art system in *Artforum*, the leading New York based contemporary art journal of the time, and to have it published as a feature article, not just as a review or as a 'Report from Australia' (which had been the status of Smith's own earlier essays in *Art International* or Donald Brook's articles in *Studio International*). The intellectual strategy had been, above all, to extrapolate the idea of provincialism from a case-study—Australia—so that it applied to all art worlds. This gave the article a particularly wide currency. It also gave Smith the opportunity to introduce Australian art to New Yorkers. He had imported political, sociological and history and philosophy of science terminology into art criticism: the words 'struggle', 'system', 'institution', 'alienation', 'entrapment' and 'imperialism', all of which had been used before in art writing nevertheless took on added poignancy on the pages of *Artforum*. He tied his analysis to the Cold War, to American foreign policy and its cultural imperialism, and had suggested a course of action. An artist-led activism might bring about change. The argument's plausibility was more dubious, for it was never clear why the perpetrators of this system might wish to consider its victims and make reparations, and it is no more clear today, either in the provinces or at the centre. The strengths of the article, however, are in no way diminished: Smith made the 'provincialism problem' an international and not an Australian issue; he set out for a wide audience a coherent explanation of the extent and strength of the provincialism system; and he framed the issue inside its political rather than its aesthetic context.

Significantly, he did this from within his participation in Art and Language (New York). The strategy that Smith had developed from his 1969 *Quadrant* article onwards was working. The association with Art and Language had given him access to platforms impossible in Australia. He solicited and received detailed editorial input, carefully handwritten across several drafts, from Burn and Ramsden. The precision and the care lavished on the article demonstrates that all involved from the

[66] Ian Burn, 'Provincialism' in *Art Dialogue* 1, October 1973: 3-11. Presented as 'Art is what we do, culture is what we do to other artists' at the Congress on Art in Its Cultural Context, Brussels, July 1973, in *Deurle 11.7.73* (Duerle, Belgium, 1973).
[67] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 120.
[68] Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem': 120.

Art and Language collective were aware of the platform the article represented and the historical position the article would then fill. It is clear that the article was an extension of Art and Language's forensic thrust as well as its collectivist ethic, though the dominant author role was Smith's. Terry Smith occupies an important position in an Australian evolution towards a genuine consciousness of provincialism. Smith had identified a way around subaltern status. His New York experience showed him, however, that this was a problem that could not be tackled head-on. For the moment, given the sheer brutal logic of the Cold War, the centre remained strong. Smith had, however, identified that the internal contradictions of metropolitan capitalism's construction of a 'natural' internationalism were potentially to be undermined from within, as they were to be later in the 1970s and then by the most famous of postmodern art's East Coast theorists, the so-called *October* group, who would then themselves become a hegemonic, art critical Establishment in the US by the later 1980s. But in the early 1970s, the pressure of the Cold War's polarities seemed both opportunity and restriction, as America's pre-eminent position within world economic and political systems was coming under attack.

By the time Terry Smith returned to Australia, in early 1975, he had been producing Art and Language works in a dialogue with the group and with Ian Burn since mid-1973. After his return, Smith conducted Art and Language discussions in Melbourne and Adelaide, whilst teaching art theory at the Philip Institute of Technology, in outer suburban Bundoora, on Melbourne's northern fringes. The Philip Institute of Technology was then a hotbed and a haven for the most experimental and least conventional art making unequalled in any other art school at the time in Australia. Smith was to move back to Sydney, eventually rebuilding the art history department at the University of Sydney as the prime centre for postmodern theory in Australia, within which the field of art criticism was widened so much that its contemporary objects—and the history of Australian art in general—were supplanted by a dramatically cosmopolitan embrace of theory and the study of visual culture rather than the history of art as it had been conceived. That university department was to play a far more important role than any other in Australia in the postmodern takeover of art and screen criticism, even though Terry Smith's predecessor, Bernard Smith, had attempted to set its course in a more traditional disciplinary direction. But Terry Smith's experience in New York had shown him that Art and Language was just as personality-driven as any other clique, and was in fact already being destroyed by the clashes between its strong personalities and egos. More importantly, Smith had seen that the provincialism problem that he had successfully defined was not solved by being resident in New York. Conceptual art's genuine internationalism might have provided a model from which to emancipate Australian art from the burden of provincialism, but Art and Language could not sustain its members as artists without participating in the establishment, which is to say by re-entering the art world. Art and Language's, success depended on building a constituency that constituted a minority large enough to sustain such a radical project, but small enough not to be forced to be mainstream nor to disappear without trace. And if this balancing act was managed for only a short period, then it was not alone, as we will now see.

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