Chapter 1

Off the Wall and In the Air: The 1970s

OFF THE WALL: THE ARTISTIC RELEVANCE OF 1970s ART

For the first time since the 1970s, we are able to see the endurance – even resnrgence – of forms and ideas that were prevalent during that decade. Installation, performance and conceptual art – deliberately ephemeral, prototypal 1970s forms that left little trace – were rapidly eclipsed or sidelined with the rediscovery of painting during the 1980s but became crucial to a definition of the 1990s.

We need to know the 1970s: they are the background against which recent art should be read. The decade saw the emergence of many artists who continue to make significant contemporary art today. One important feature of contemporary art is its conflation of 1970s idealism with more recent, postmodern theories of the body as a social text and of representation as an irrevocably mediated activity. Then, there was considerable emphasis on the intentions of the artist. There is a vast gulf between that determination by artists to shape discourse and a postmodern acceptance, now, of the death of the author as the sole arbiter of meaning. The ubiquitous stress on the artist's intentions is at odds with postmodern notions of intertextuality, quotation and the intricate tracery of other authors hidden in every work.[1] However, in the effort to define the shape of the present, the differences that separate contemporary audiences from the 1970s are often elided.

The rationale for many works in the 1970s is in fact antipathetic to redefinition within the context of the hyperreal, postmodern present. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the 1970s are far from voiceless. Artists such as Mike Parr and Robert Hunter, who are central to any discussion of the 1970s, have also produced recent work of international significance. With exemplary care and clarity, writers such as Donald Brook and Anne Marsh continue to write about and critique into the 1990s the praxis we take to be paradigmatically that of the 1970s. For that reason many of the artists discussed in this chapter, including Mike Parr, Domenico de Clario and Aleks Danko, also appear later in the book.

Our surprising ignorance of the 1970s is the result of its proximity – who was willing to admit to wearing corduroy flares until the start of the 1990s, when the "grunge" look began to be fashionable? Its art was more or less obliterated by institutions during the following decade. In the teleological progression favoured by historians and curators, art demonstrating aesthetic advances was favoured over work that was indifferent to artistic judgement. After all, the very innovations that facilitated a redefinition of art, beyond the belief in art as a timeless enterprise, were ironically the means by which the 1970s were turned into art history and grainy photographs of ephemeral performances in low-rent galleries were curated and commodified.

The new art of the 1970s – Performance Art, Earth Art, Process Art, Conceptual Art, Pattern Painting, Community Art, Women's Art – was a development from the innovations in practice and theory of the previous decade. Many commentators noted that modernism had finally ground to a halt in the late 1960s. After years of market hegemony during the 1960s, the formalist Establishment was on the defensive. When English sculptor Anthony Caro, a protegé of American critic and guru Clement Greenberg, spoke to students at the National Gallery Art School in Melbourne during a visit to Australia in 1971, he bemoaned his St. Martin's College students' refusal to make "serious" sculptures, accusing them all of wishing to call themselves "living sculptures" or go for long walks in the countryside. The respective targets of his indignation were English artists such as

1 For a concise explanation of these concepts, including "the death of the author", see Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text", in his *Image–Music–Text*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1977, pp.155-164, and reprinted in Brian Wallis' excellent anthology, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New Museum, New York, 1984, pp.169-174.

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Gilbert & George, Hamish Fulton and Richard Long, all of whom visited Australia to make important works during the period we discuss.[2]

By the mid-1980s a process of obliteration was well advanced: critics asserted that art had been caged in by repressive 1970s puritanism; museums moved to marginalise their representation of alternative forms – off to the basement with the sticks and twigs. Diversionary mutations, such as the post-feminism of the late 1980s, at first sight trivialised the key achievements of the 1970s. Painting returned to the centre of cultural life. Now, however, we have come to value at least three of that decade's central concerns: the profound conceit (incorrect, as it turned out) of the death of art; the explosion of every possible idea about art (to the point of almost ineffectual pluralism) together with the expansion of possible identities for artists; and, finally, the attempt to recreate art institutions. They form the three themes of this chapter.

ART IS DEAD: ARTISTIC CRISIS AND RADICAL DISSENT

Radical Art and Artistic Disappearance

The moves that artists made into new forms – and especially those towards the dematerialisation of the art object – were linked in their minds to various forms of radical politics rather than to a purely aesthetic dialogue. Donald Brook, an extremely influential advocate for post-object and experimental art forms in Sydney as critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and later in Adelaide at Flinders University, recalled in 1988 that:

> the post-object art of the 1970s to which I believed I was contributing was not one movement but at least a dozen, travelling in almost as many directions. But the central idea was of a dissent which has heen consistently misdiagnosed.[3]

Much 1970s art, as Brook implies, was distinguished by its transformational or self-transformational intention, the concern to work outside established systems, and a sympathy with radicalism. These feral intentions were often more naive and unfocused than effective.

Running through the discourse of the 1970s was a linkage of artists' intentions to Left-wing radicalism, and an awareness of the cultural trauma associated, after 1968, with the idea of the death of art. Artists wished to move outside the boundaries of previous work, to make anti-art (or even stop making art) and either to deal directly with nature or with a politicised cultural discourse.[4] Marginal and underprivileged cultural groups were consistently regarded as important examples. Activity modelled on the perverse, the deprived and the criminal – like that of Melbourne artist Ivan Durrant – attracted considerable attention. Durrant's actions, from the exhibition of a severed hand (allegedly purchased from a needy student) to his slaughter of a cow at the entrance of the National Gallery of Victoria, achieved massive notoriety and the attention of the police. Mitch Johnson experimented with incendiary devices in public places, blowing up lamp-posts; Paula Dawson (who later became well-known for her pioneering work with holograms) shattered sheets of corrugated iron with explosives. Stelarc launched himself at a wall of plate glass in 1976, smashing through the glass with considerable force and cutting himself seriously in the process.[5]

Although Australian artists were distant from late-1960s American and European turmoil, they were far from unaffected by the sense of utopian possibility current in popu-

2 All were influential role models for younger artists during the 1970s. Gilbert & George were sponsored by Sydney patron John Kaldor as one of his important Art Projects.

3 Donald Brook, "From the margin", in *The present and recent past of Australian art and criticism*, special supplement, *Agenda* n.2, August 1988, p.9.

4 Many observers claim to remember one "exhibition" where Sydney artist Neil Evans swallowed tape-worms which then lived inside his stomach for the duration of the "show". Evans later gave up art – a radical artistic act in itself. Neil Evans described another piece, *The Organic Account of Neil Evans, April 1970*, 1970, thus: "*The Organic Account* lists everything I ate and drank, everything I crapped or pissed or eliminated bodily in any other way. The time of each ingestion and rejection was recorded." Neil Evans, quoted in interview with Terry Smith, in Tony McGillick and Terry Smith (curators), *The Situation Now*, Contemporary Art Society, Sydney, July 16-August 6, 1971, p. 37.

5 Stelarc, who lived outside Australia for long periods, principally in Japan, was, and remains, one of very few Australian artists to achieve a considerable international reputation. He was best known for his "suspensions" – performances where the artist hung in mid-air, his body attached to cables by hooks inserted into his skin – and attempts to create a new body using complex prosthetic limbs. Stelarc's 1972 performance at Pinacotheca in Melbourne was seen by many artists: in this early work, he was suspended in a harness; his gaze was amplified by laser eyes.

lar culture and the fine arts. The anti-Vietnam movement was only one aspect of an often inconsistent mood of social change in Australia. Young Australians were profoundly affected, not just by events in Paris during 1968 but by the alternative youth culture of the American West Coast and by self-consciously artistic rock & roll bands such as Iron Butterfly and The Grateful Dead. Local bands and venues – Spectrum and the T. F. Much Ballroom, for example – reflected these influences.

Italian critic Germano Celant, a crucial figure in European art of the 1970s, looked back in 1985 and noted that:

> The creative events of 1967-68 thus marked a historical watershed: the dogma of neutrality was rooted out, since there is no way of separating the object from the creative act, from the awareness of and participation in its reasons and technical input. Art is no longer a virginal nature.[6]

6 Germano Celant, "The European Concert and the Festival of the Arts", in Germano Celant (curator), *The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1985, p.19.

Celant also observed that the 1968 exasperation about unrealisable utopias, after the failure of student riots, made the 1970s schizophrenic. Artists with radical sympathies – many marched against the Vietnam War during Moratorium demonstrations in Australia's capital cities – naturally if uncritically identified the practice of art with an often inconsistent alternative culture. This perception was based on a shared sense of being "outside" the system. Many artists, confronted by the choice between a conception of the artist as a suited professional with a one-way flight to New York or an image of the artist as a social critic and committed conscience, felt a profound if confused desire to move outside conventional domains of art to a different relationship with their audience. The few, however, who were prepared to move outside "the system" into the counter-culture disappeared into the alternative milieus of inner-city community activism and rural hippy-commune politics, leaving little trace of their existence. The schizophrenia noted by Celant ensured that cultural criticism would be imaged as crisis or that it would simply disappear.

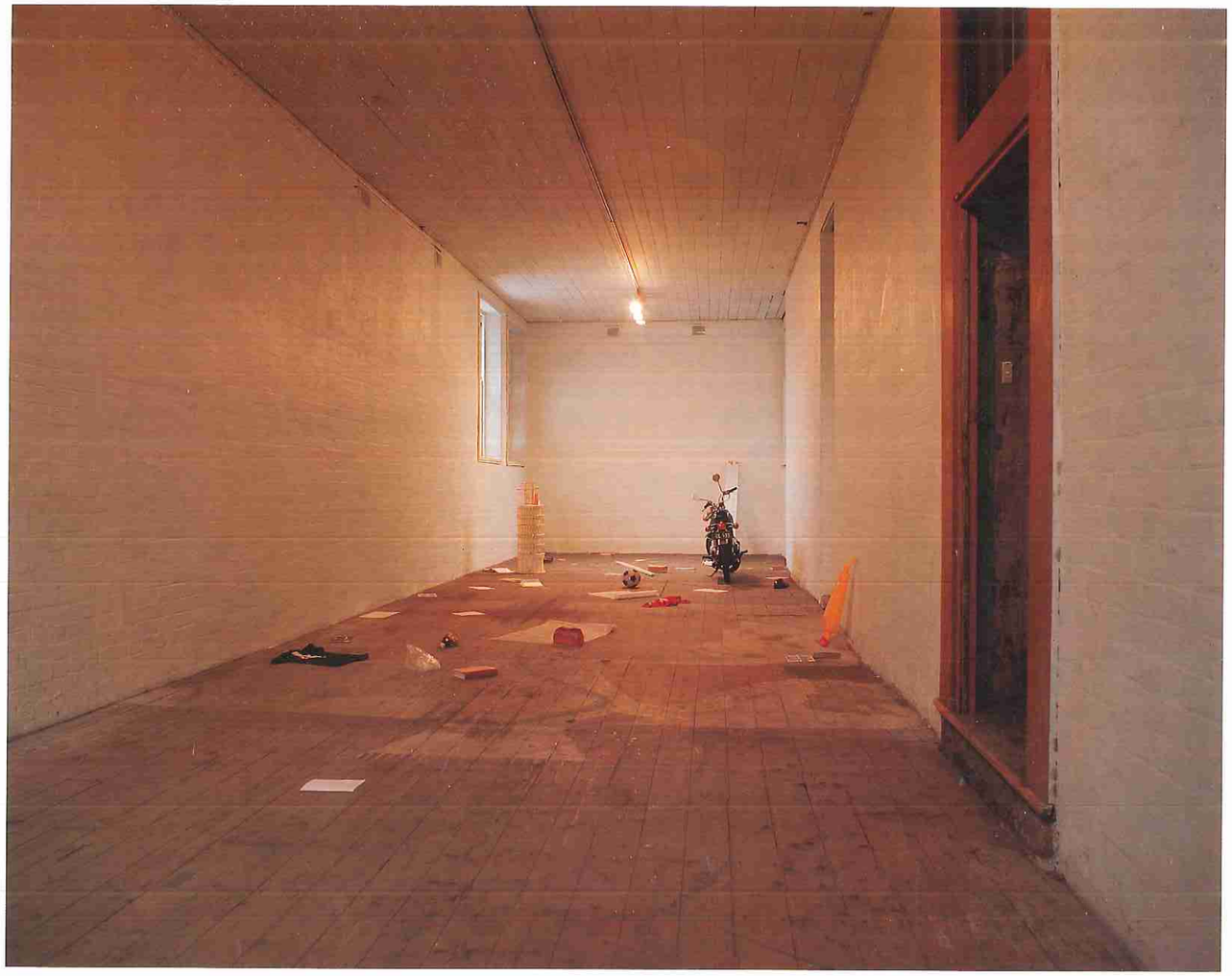
Domenico de Clario: Lost and Found in Richmond

In the late 1960s, the disappearance of art into life seemed both imminent and urgent. In Domenico de Clario's *Untitled*, 1973, this disappearance was almost attained. Based in measured systems, it drew on the artist's architectural studies and his desire to re-establish relationships with the real world and its objects.

For three weeks de Clario gradually moved a quantity of everyday items from the small gallery at Pinacotheca, in Melbourne, into the gallery's cavernous main space. This was done according to a random process. The main gallery's floor was divided into 120 separate squares. De Clario moved ten objects at a time from the first room to the second; their destination was decided by the throw of a set of dice. At the start of the exhibition the small gallery was full: a motorcycle, books, clothes, loaves of bread, toys, a child's rocking horse, a vacuum cleaner. Much of this had been gleaned from friends' car boots. Lost to everyday life, these items were found for a while in the gallery before they resumed an existence in cars, cupboards and on book-shelves. For the show's duration, the artist's motorcycle sat in the gallery, a fact noted by the *Age*'s reviewer, Patrick McCaughey, who sympathised with the artist's reliance on public transport.

Looking back, one observes that, like *Untitled*, many works from the period play a game of lost and found with their viewers, as if their attention span was eternal and time

1:1 Domenico de Clario, *Untitled*, 1973, installation, Pinacotheca, Melbourne.



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was suspended within a gallery's white walls. In fact, much Process Art, like Earth Art, demanded from its audience stamina that was very rarely granted, still less rewarded by subsequent institutional immortality.[7] De Clario's installation remains in a few grainy photographs. At this critical moment, art tended to disappear into life.

A desire to deal with the particular disorientation caused by the experience of art as a form of cultural capital – fluid, abstract and invisible – resulted in incessant documentation and game-playing. Objects from everyday life were employed not as aesthetic forms but because of their existing meanings, which they did not lose. The double coding afforded by real objects suggested their original functions whilst allowing them to embody the figures of new representational systems. De Clario was intensely aware of this intangibility; he asserted that *Untitled* was an investigation of the auras left by his real objects, their absences and the extent to which they projected into space.

Untitled was de Clario's nervous attempt to fix perception before sensation slipped away into the stream of time. It was marked by anxiety. Documentation of the present was based on an awareness of the failure of previous artists to adequately deal with an ontology of minute experience. This anxiety and pathos was shared by other Pinacotheca artists like Dale Hickey, Robert Rooney and Simon Klose, who worked together to enumerate every possible, quasi-conceptual attribute of a cup, in a large joint exhibition of paintings in 1973. De Clario's inclination was more theosophic, recognising time's subjective ability to move at shifting velocities. Installations like his insisted on their status as interruptions: they remained largely lost to the museums that they covertly and poignantly addressed. Reception was brief and often hostile. De Clario's *Elemental Landscapes*, 1975, installed at the National Gallery of Victoria, was dismantled by order of the then Director Gordon Thomson, prompting an angry sit-in by artists and students. Publicity for their cause was a Pyrrhic victory, however, since the installation's energetic curator, Jennifer Phipps, was later removed from the gallery's staff.

If retrospectively we empathise with the freedom that the rejection of traditional forms was supposed to have created for us, we are more likely to see the pathos actually embodied in de Clario's installation shots or Robert Rooney's melancholic Instamatics of neatly folded underwear.

7 To grasp de Clario's work properly, one would have had to have visited the gallery each day. Almost certainly, the only person to do this was the Director, Bruce Pollard. Attendances at cutting-edge galleries were, and remain, woefully small. To visit Earth Art sites, such as American artist Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, in Utah, or Marr Grounds' complicated 1970s multi-sited Australian installations, required a massive commitment of time and energy.

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"No cultural rubbish": The Claims of New Art

During the later 1960s, claims were made that contemporary art would "alter" its audience. This centred around the perceptual changes induced by viewer participation in phenomenological inquiries, as they were incarnated in conceptual art works. Harald Szeemann's earlier exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form", at the Kunsthalle, Berne and Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in 1969, was a crucial example to many artists. English critic and member of the Art & Language group, Charles Harrison, republished his catalogue essay in *Studio International*. His rather breathless text was read by many Australian artists:

> Art changes human consciousness. The less an art work can be seen to be dependent, in its reference, on specific and identifiable facts and appearances in the world at one time, the more potent it becomes as a force for effecting such a change… By opening ourselves to such experience we render possible the realignment of our own consciousness in favour of the constant rather than the immediately insistent factors of human life.[8]

8 Charles Harrison, "Against Precedents", *Studio International* v.178 n.914, September 1969, p.90.

1:2 Domenico de Clario, *Elemental Landscapes*, 1975, installation, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Photograph: Brecon Walsh.

1:3 Dale Hickey, *Cup*, 1972-73, oil on canvas, 32 x 32 cm. Courtesy Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne.

Traditional painting and sculpture, including fashionable abstract painting, were incapable of such ties with alternative politics. This post-object critique of art devolved, however, into an administrative and bureaucratic activity, dependent for its purpose on the perpetuation of art – not the death of art. Critic and Art & Language member Terry Smith observed, with an unorthodox sense of chronology in an apocalyptic essay for the 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial, that:

> we find ourselves at the tail end of a decade quantitatively rich in the production of diverse and extreme art, yet paradoxically marked by a failure of sensibility such that the making of art has become an embattled, rootless and theoretically-fragile pursuit.[9]

9 Terry Smith, "Art Criticism/Self Criticism", in Tom McCullough (curator), *6th Mildura Sculpture Exhibition*, Mildura Regional Art Gallery, Mildura, 1975, p.3.

Many artists chose to retreat from the brink of this quasi-nihilism and to start again. Dale Hickey moved from *90 White Walls*, 1970, a collection of photographs of ninety different white walls, presented like file cards in a handmade wooden box, to the apparently conventional cup paintings of 1972-73. His development was consistent with an underlying commitment to a linguistic inquiry influenced by Wittgenstein, but minimalist painting obsessed by the Zen "cupness" of a cup was only going to intersect with its iconoclastic, puritan American cousin for a brief historical moment. It would have little in common with other streams of advanced art that envisaged, as West German critic Bazon Brock remembers, "no cultural rubbish that had to be sent to museum dumping grounds. The museum itself was to become a department store, transit depot for groceries and articles of everyday use."[10]

10 Bazon Brock, "Cultural and artistic development in West Germany from the Sixties to the Eighties", in Germano Celant (curator), *The European Iceberg*, p. 248.

This cultural moment was widely noted, by those for whom the times were changing, and by those for whom they most certainly were not. There was a gulf evident at the 1973 Mildura Sculpture Triennial between the older welded-steel sculptors and younger post-object artists like Ross Grounds. The incompatibility between works like Grounds' ecological bunker dug deep into the red Mildura earth, *Ecology Well*, 1973, and the heavy-metal offerings of older sculptors, led to the enclave of formalist works being labelled "Karo Korner".

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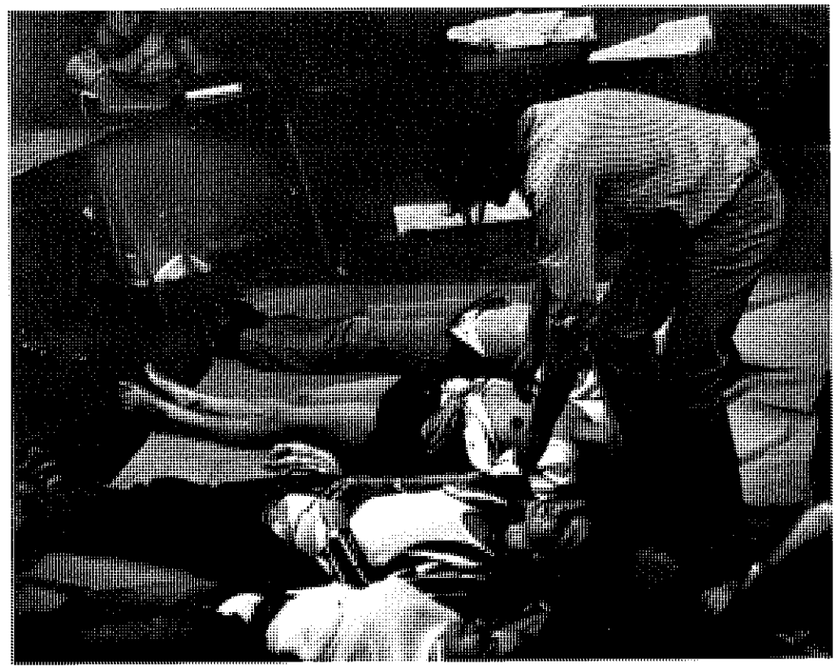
THE EXPANSION OF ART: NEW FORMS AND NEW IDENTITIES

Kevin Mortensen, Peter Kennedy, Robert Hunter: Blurring the Division between Art and the Real World

If "anything goes", how do artists make decisions? The new art forms stressed their oppositional politics. They also, and this is not the same thing, blurred the division between galleries and the real world outside their doors. Of all the art that temporarily filled Australian galleries and museums over the last 30 years, there was no genre more elusive but crucial than performance – the form where this blurring was most obvious and where the link with a different vision of the artist was most completely realised.

Performance Art spanned an enormous range of activity, from the early happenings of the late 1960s (the late-modernist psychedelic *bricolage* of Stelarc's post-millennial reconstructions of the human body), to Lyndal Jones' sophisticated, complex *Prediction Pieces* of the 1980s and 1990s, which will be examined in a later chapter.

Many performances combined unintentionally hilarious clichés and excruciating boredom with sudden, electrifying glimpses of the dark edges of human activity; artists often rejected the most cherished ideas of modernity and societal normality. Perfor-



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mance Art was always more than Body Art, in which the identification of the limits of psychic and physical endurance was explored. Stelarc's first, aptly titled performance, *Event from micro to macro and the between*, 1969, incorporated motifs that were to be repeated endlessly during the 1970s at performance festivals and conferences.[11] Three dancers performed in front of images projected onto screens while the audience experimented with the alternative states of perception offered by specially designed helmets. Interactivity (and deliberate exploitation of the audience) was incorporated in other types of performance, such as Tim Johnson's early *Disclosures*, 1972-73, which featured Johnson's removal of the audiences' clothing and a group experience of sexual arousal, or Kevin Mortensen's epic deception, *The Delicatessen*, 1975, in which Mortensen collaborated with Eddie Rosser, an actor who took the role of a veteran scarred by war atrocities. Mortensen rented a shop in Mildura, at 70 Langtree Avenue, months before the opening of the 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial, and Rosser gradually prepared the shop for business, measuring it up, sweeping the pavement and sleeping on a stretcher bed. The shop that I saw during the Triennial contained, of course, no merchandise, and nothing seemed to happen, but it was not until the Triennial opened that the local populace realised that Rosser and his delicatessen were a work of art.

The dispersal of art activities through the community, rather than their concentration in museums, was Peter Kennedy's aim. He "felt tbat Marxist art theoreticians had not come up with a solution for making art an integral part of community life".[12] His performance/actions involved the use of non-professional participants in real-life, real-time situations. Kennedy's *Introductions*, 1976, documented the artist's work with members of a Hot-Rod Club, an Embroidery Club, a Bushwalking Club, and a Marching Girls Club. He prepared videos and watercolour portraits of each group, by which he facilitated tbe

11 Anne Marsh, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-92*, OUP, Melbourne, 1993, p. 25. Marsh's book gives an exhaustive analysis of 1970s performance.

12 Peter Kennedy, quoted in Jennifer Phipps (curator), *Two Contemporary Artists: Peter Kennedy and John Nixon*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1976, unpaginated.

1: 4 Tim Johnson, *Disclosures*, 1972, performance, Sydney University Fine Arts Workshop. Photograph courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, gift of Tim Johnson, 1991.

1: 5 Kevin Mortensen, *The Seagull Salesman, his stock and visitors, or figures of identification*, 1971, installation/performance, Pinacotheca, Melbourne. Photograph: Ian Wallace. Courtesy Australian Galleries, Melbourne.

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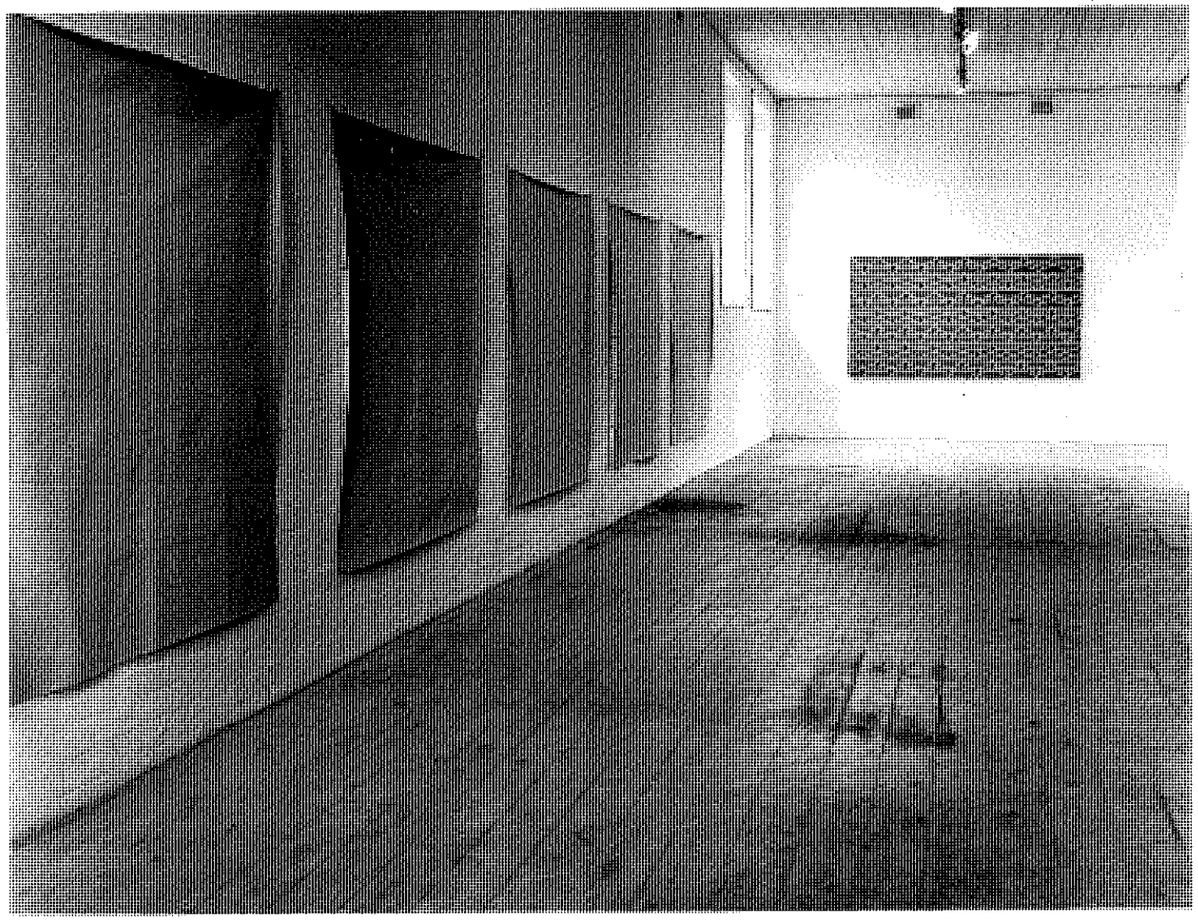

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1:6 Inaugural exhibition, Pinacotheca, Richmond (installation view), 1970. The photograph shows, at left, Robert Hunter's *Untitled*, 1970, synthetic polymer paint on paper and masking tape, six units of 165.2 x 151.8 cm and, at right, Robert Rooney's *Superknit 1*, 1969, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 134 x 235 cm. Both works were subsequently acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria.

1:7 Peter Kennedy, *Introductions*, 1976, installation. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

1:8 Bonita Ely, *Mt Feathertop*, 1979-1981, installation, Art Projects, Melbourne. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

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introduction of one club to another. Kennedy exhibited this project in 1976 at the National Gallery of Victoria. His coexhibitor was John Nixon, whose arrangement of text on cards, *Blast*, 1976, sought to critique the vocation of artist. Nixon wrote: "Finally it comes down to 'where do *you* stand!?' Now that's more than a simple question; after all, isn't it a question of *your* 'form of life'."[13] His polemic, pamphleteering style was all exclamation marks and underlining. Nixon's insistence on a second-person address, *from within* the institutions of art, was intended to defeat the normal social relations of viewing. Whether such an aim was not in itself an impossibility was an issue taken up by many critics, most articulately by Donald Brook.[14]

The same was true of a very different artist, Robert Hunter. For his 1970 installation at Pinacotheca, Hunter stencilled 11 grids onto the gallery's walls in grey paint; in the inaugural exhibition at the gallery he taped paper to the walls. He later said, "I want to make something alien – alien to myself" and described his desire to avoid creating "*objets d'art*".[15] Hunter's steadfastly consistent movement beyond formalist discourse meant that his inquiry into the particular elements constituted in the act of viewing – amongst which, from the late 1980s onwards, was the experience of flight, in more psychedelic and only superficially minimal paintings of white on white – soon parted company with the straightforward minimalism of his American friend Carl Andre.

13 John Nixon, "Blast: A General Note", in Jennifer Phipps (curator), *Two Contemporary Artists*, unpaginated.

14 Donald Brook presented the most articulate dissection of this paradox in numerous articles including his 1988 "From the margin" and the 1969 Power Lecture, "Flight from the Art Object", reprinted in Bernard Smith (ed.), *Concerning Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, Sydney, 1974, pp. 16-34.

15 Robert Hunter, quoted in Gary Catalano, "Robert Hunter", *Art and Australia* v.17 n.1, March 1979, p. 78.

Bonita Ely: The New Wave of Women's Art

Bonita Ely's work was also distinguished by these contradictions. Like Elizabeth Gower, Ely was one of the important artists who emerged from the milieu of the Women's Art Movement in the mid-1970s. She was involved in a variety of projects: the compilation of the Melbourne-based Women's Art Register (an exhaustive collection of slide documentation of Australian women artists); participation in the Women's Art Movement (given impetus by pioneering American, feminist art critic Lucy Lippard's 1975 visit to Australia); and completion of works such as the enormous *Mt Feathertop* project, shown at Art Projects in separate instalments during 1979 and 1981. An immensely ambitious and powerful work, this was a prototype for ecological art of the late 1980s. It comprised paintings, an out-sized *papier mâché* sculpture of the mountain itself, and Hans Haacke-like documentations of ecological pillage. Ely was also involved in performance, and there she escaped the complicity of the aesthetic and its aspirations to the museum wall. Impeccably dressed and coiffured, in suburban drop-dead glamour, she presented *Murray River Punch,* 1980, to an astonished student audience at Melbourne University in the Student Union foyer, indistinguishable from any number of minor-league celebrities giving away free samples and snacks in supermarkets. The recipe was as follows:

> Using a blender or beater combine:
> 6 cups deoxygenated water
> 2 tbl. sp. fertiliser
> 1/4 cup of human urine
> 1/4 cup of human faeces
> 1 dst. sp. dried European carp
> Place mixture on a gentle heat. Add:
> 2 cups salt
> Stir constantly until the salt dissolves then bring to the boil.
> Remove from heat. Stir in:
> 2 tbl. sp. superphosphate
> 2 tbl. sp. insecticide [16]
> 2 tbl. sp. chlorine. Serves 18 people.

16 Bonita Ely, artist's statement, *Murray River Punch* pamphlet, Melbourne, 1980, unpaginated.

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17 Anne Marsh, "Women Artists at the Triennial", *Art Network* 3&4, Winter/Spring 1981, p. 24.

18 Anne Marsh, "The interception of performance art and feminism in the 1970s", in *The present and recent past of Australian art and criticism*, special supplement, *Agenda* n. 2, August 1988, p.11.

1: 9-10 Bonita Ely, *Jabiluka UO2*, 1979, performance, Preston Institute of Technology Performance Festival, Melbourne. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

1: 11 Bonita Ely, *The Murray River*, 1980, mixed media including Murray River sands, pigments and handmade paper, dimensions variable. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

1: 12 Bonita Ely, *Histories*, 1992, mixed media, 55 x 215 cm. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

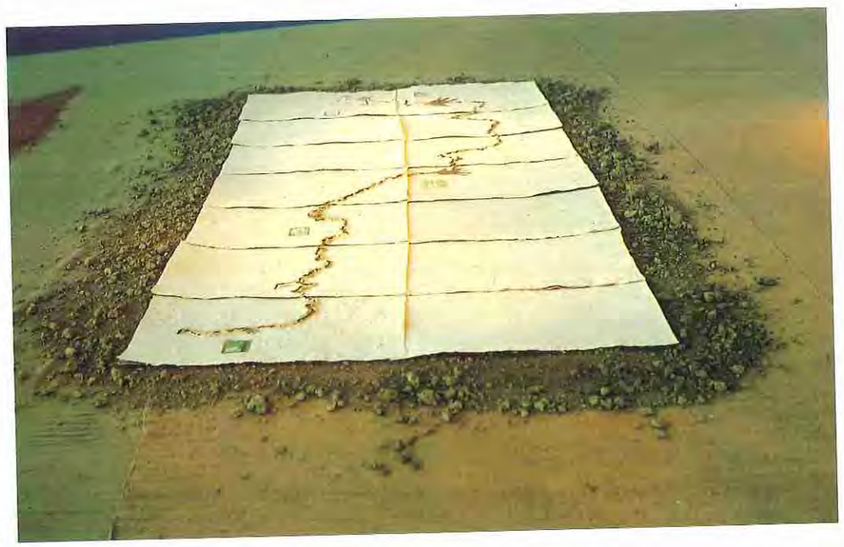
1: 13
Title: *detail*
A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/
someone looks at something ...
SHOOTING GALLERY/RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE
Medium: *A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/*
someone looks at something ...
CULTURAL CONSUMPTION PRODUCTION
Date: – 1978–
Artist: Peter Tyndall
Courtesy: Anna Schwartz Gallery

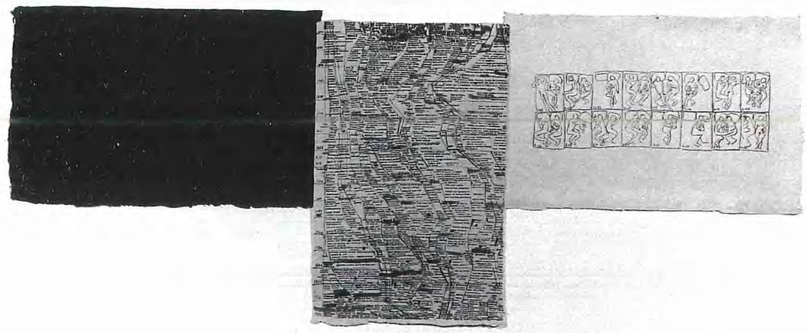
1:11

In contrast, Ely also produced a ritualistic anti-uranium piece, *Jabiluka UO2*. This was performed in Melbourne during 1979, and also at the halcyon 1980 performance festival, ACT 2, in Canberra. The author assisted in both performances. Ely, dressed in a white boiler-suit, erected an elaborate sand-castle from coloured earths and then arranged a spiral of flammable straw across the adjacent lawn. Her male assistant traced a rigidly straight path in white lime across the field towards her, eventually scattering the sand construction. Simultaneously, Ely set fire to the straw, etching a primal design onto the grass.

Ritual-based performance focused on the revelation of an identity so primal that it would be side-lined as both overtly Australian and covertly artificial in the next decade. Performances such as *Jabiluka* were to be criticised during the 1980s; Anne Marsh said, in a 1981 review of women artists at Melbourne's First Sculpture Triennial, at La Trobe University, that "ritual is a fairly safe bet if you're backing neutral politics".[17] Ely's feminism certainly wasn't that, but reinscriptions of woman-as-other playing nature to man's culture were seen as regressive by a newer generation of theorists during the 1980s. The shamanism and ritual of performances such as those by Bonita Ely and Jill Orr were far from the analytic postmodernism which examined "issues" and the politics of representation itself. Such art would replace performances like Ely's and Orr's in public and critical eyes during the 1980s.[18]

In the 1980s, Ely turned to printmaking from this background in performance art. Like Mike Parr she was interested in the limitations of the body as an object, but she was also intensely aware that the blankness of paper was political and, for her, specifically feminine. Like other feminist artists of her generation, she was determined to foreground this awareness and turn it into a positive quality. Ely completed *The Murray River* in 1980, using a combination of print-based technologies: handmade paper; staining by natural earths; and etching. She overtly "feminised" her sheets of paper, identifying their white empty spaces as both landscape and a woman's body. Her large, fragmented works on paper of the 1990s moved further into mixing and matching an encyclopedic range of





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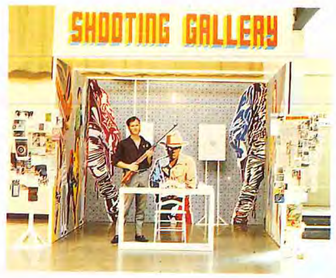
visual systems, information and words. Bonita Ely moved outside the comfortable conventions of modernism and its formalist view of media as a neutral resource awaiting the artist's intervention. Her performances also crossed the boundaries of Body Art into less narcissistic modes such as community participation. Representation, the artist has continued to assert, is both political and personal.



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Peter Tyndall and Robert Rooney: Authorship as a Laughing Matter

What were the constructed worlds that 1970s artists saw as the Self? The indivisible authority of a well-known name was not easily discarded. Conceptual artist Mel Ramsden retrospectively observed, in 1990, the difference between the expanded view of authorship held by the Art & Language group, and "the conventional view of authorship held by one of the journal's most important founding editors, Joseph Kosuth. For him, his authorship was no laughing matter."[19] Many artists were aware of the relativity of essential identity described by contemporary thought. In 1981, Peter Tyndall obliquely described the subject in a manner that exactly fitted his own paintings and installations, including his shooting gallery at the 1978 Mildura Sculpture Triennial:

> A painting does not float, independent, half-way up a random wall. "It" is physically dependent on the strings which support it against the gravitational force which would bring "it" down ... nor can "the (one's) perceiving" be considered outside the influence or colouring of either the physical light (physical lights) or the metaphoric lights (cultural knowledge ...)[20]

Tyndall's gently didactic sideshow was both a shooting gallery without conventional prizes (but with lengthy semiotic discussions) and an examination of the social body. It was inevitable, in the wake of such a dispersed notion of the art object, that meaning would be seen to reside in the person of the artist. The search for "truth" would assume largely autobiographical forms.

Superficiality itself was a dominant mood and artistic method; this "Cool" quality was widely remarked upon in Melbourne art and was exemplified by painter and art critic Robert Rooney, an important figure in the experimental group of artists associated with Pinacotheca. In Rooney's works from the 1970s, like *Holden Park 1 & 2*, 1970, superficiality and Cool were necessary accomplices in his search for the Self. Unable to locate meaning and identity with the, in retrospect naive, assurance of most of his contemporaries, he suggested its testimony in the circulation of objects. In his own conceptual

19 Mel Ramsden, quoted in Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, "Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden on Art & Language", *Art & Text* n.35, Summer 1990, p. 32.

20 Peter Tyndall, "Slave Guitars (*formerly* Slave Guitars of the Art Cult)", *Art & Text* n.4, Summer 1981, pp. 44-45.

photographs of the 1970s, Rooney could not retrieve subjectivity, and was too honest to pretend differently. American critic Robert Pincus-Witten's epigram, "I document, therefore I am", summarised many post-object artists' methods.[21]

21 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Anglo-American reference works: Acute conceptualism", *Artforum* v.10 n.2, October 1971, p. 84.

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22 Aleks Danko, artist's statement, in Tony McGillick and Terry Smith (curators), *The Situation Now: Object or Post-Object Art?*, Contemporary Art Society Gallery, Sydney, 1971, p. 25.

23 Aleks Danko, interview with the author, Melbourne, January 1994.

24 Mike Parr, "Parallel Fictions: The Third Biennale of Sydney, 1979", *Art and Australia* v.17 n.2, December 1979, p. 183.

1:14 Aleks Danko, *Born April 7th 1950*, from *Fragments 1971*, installation, Watters Gallery, Sydney, 1975. Collection: Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston. Photograph: John Delacour. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Bellas Gallery, Brisbane.

1:15 Aleks Danko, *The Danko 1971 Aesthetic Withdrawal Kit*, 1971, steel 3" x 5" filing-card drawer. Photograph: Douglas Thomson. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Bellas Gallery, Brisbane.

1:16 Robert Rooney, *Holden Park 1 & 2*, 1970, sheet of colour photographs, 76 x 102 cms. Collection: Monash University Gallery. Courtesy Pinacotheca, Melbourne.

Aleks Danko: The Conceptual Art of Administration

Aleks Danko gained notoriety during the 1970s as a kind of clown conceptualist. He definitely encouraged this: in contrast to the otherwise extremely ponderous essays for the catalogue of an important 1971 exhibition, "The Situation Now", Danko submitted the following description of his works: "I enjoy the fact that they are useless in their present function and possess a strange, pleasant unpleasantness. Moreover, I enjoy pulling faces."[22] The pseudo-clinical presentation of himself in the works for "The Situation Now", *Self Portraits I, II, and III*, 1970, was repeated (for example in *Born April 7th 1950*, 1975), confirming Danko's determined three-fold intentions: to vacate the self from the body; to present his corporeal form as an index, not an icon; and to question the status of art as a communicative act. Danko's pieces gained immediate attention because, like a ghoulish post-object conscience, they addressed the most pressing issues without apparent piety, but with humour and macabre, Gothic shock value. *Born April 7th 1950* completely avoided didacticism; the experience of dislocation of personality (into improbable, slightly repulsive signs of the body and its functions) undercut that of alienation. Danko was the Caravaggio of conceptualism.

Many of his conceptual sculptures featured this fetishisation of bureaucratic conceptualism through the elaborate craft of packaging; the packaging itself usually took the form of different kinds of boxes. He was aware of Marcel Duchamp's use of boxes and sexual motifs, and approved of his hyperalertness towards style and authorship.[23] His works, such as *The Danko 1971 Aesthetic Withdrawal Kit*, 1971, had the secretive portability valued by professional thieves or confidence tricksters. *The Danko 1971 Aesthetic Withdrawal Kit* should be counterpointed with the many boxes of filing cards through which artists, including Mike Parr and the American minimalist Robert Morris, indexed the 1970s. Danko's steel 3 x 5 inches filing-card drawer was labelled "The Danko 1971 Aesthetic Withdrawal Kit". The drawer was pulled open to an empty box, immediate disappointment and a card which read "This is your moment of aesthetic withdrawal". Like American Robert Morris's notorious *I-Box*, 1962, it was a sleight-of-hand and suggested several semiotic puns based on melancholy identifications of art, drugs and sex.

Mike Parr: The Safe House of Cathartic Experience

Mike Parr achieved a different notoriety in the early 1970s, as a performance artist whose works involved tests of endurance and self-mutilation. He shared with Danko a desire to work inside the space of the museum. However, Parr saw the museum as a place where "real life" would be suspended. In an article on performance in the 1979 Sydney Biennale, Parr powerfully articulated his belief that the museum offered artist and audience a kind of "safe house", where an enhanced relationship could be created out of cathartic experience.[24] Though the themes now seem familiar, the way that Parr explored his relationship with an audience – shocking or trapping them into an often brutal complicity – had considerable impact. In *Cathartic Action/Social Gestus No. 5*, 1977, the formation of identity and its attendant loss of innocence was equated with the artist's childhood loss of an arm. Representing the exorcism of that trauma, he hacked


















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off an imitation limb before a horrified audience. A 1979 statement of Parr's about the performances of Marina Abramovic/Ulay now seems autobiographical:

> Performance art like this is cathartic both for the performers and the audience, emotions emerge afterwards in a rush as a consequence of being dammed up ... Everyone feels relieved: a rite has been survived, order and meaning have been re-established, but at a new order of clarity that incorporates part of the intensity felt.[25]

The artist was well aware of the psychoanalytic and therapeutic implications of his work, which continually made literal and metaphoric use of the idea of catharsis, observing in a statement for a 1981 exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria that:

> My films build on the absence of the image (the sign of the wound in *Rules & Displacement Activities* is the montage itself). I am interested in the long space of the past (re-open wounds and the past returns with a rush) ... At the point of convergence, we share a language in common.[26]

Parr attempted to find the point at which normal bodily processes, such as aversion to pain or the desire to breathe, would collapse under the onslaught of his interventions. Clear affinities with the work of Austrian Body artist Hermann Nitsch, and the dramatisation of psychoanalytic theories such as mirror-phase reflexivity through instant replays on video monitors, emphasised Parr's desire to test the limits of the availability of the body as an object – even to the performer. He was also preoccupied with the reverse: the accessibility of the Self. The artist's "I" was described by Parr in 1981 in existential terms:

> For a long while for me, the framed record seemed to deny the existentialism of the event; the fact that each performance is a form of survival and that the performance is experienced by the performer at the edge of the present tense.[27]

An endless journey towards the self was imaged in the films *Rules and Displacement*

25 Mike Parr, "Parallel Fictions", *Art and Australia* v.17 n.2, p.183.

26 Mike Parr, artist's statement, in Robert Lindsay (curator), *Relics and Rituals: Survey 15*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1981, unpaginated.

27 Mike Parr, in Robert Lindsay (curator), *Relics and Rituals*. For an extensive description of Parr's art, see David Bromfield, *Identities: A Critical Study of the Work of Mike Parr 1970-1990*. University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1991.

1:17 Mike Parr, *Cathartic Action/Social Gestus No. 5*, 1977, performance, The Sculpture Centre, Sydney, from *Rules & Displacement Activities Part 3*, 16mm film, b&w and colour, 90 minutes. Photograph: John Delacour. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

1:18 Mike Parr, *Black Box: Theatre of Self Correction, Part 1, Performance No. 1*, 1979, performance, 3rd Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph: John Delacour. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

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Activities: Parts 1, 2 and 3, 1973-85. The different versions of *Black Box* were linked in intricate ways to all of the artist's 1970s performances, and thus to the films that mediated this activity. The "Performance Room" versions of *Black Box: Theatre of Self Correction, Performances 1-6,* 1979, were made in conjunction with the artist's family, and marked a shift from earlier confrontations that had reflected the impact of the European improvisation and performance movement Fluxus. Parr was intensely aware of phenomenological and psychoanalytic theory but his work was also notable for its latent quest for integration, where violent acts foregrounded a stoic and heroic self.

If Parr's work was primarily autobiographical, it was also highly complex. Parr was aware of the contradictions inherent in the documentation of his performances, noting much later, in 1993, that:

> The idea of photodeath has to do with my looking at the documentation of the 1970s performances and becoming aware of the substitution of all the risk of the performance by the process of its representation. It's terribly ironic, in that the point of the performance was to destroy the static containment of the image, of the idea. That meaning can only be contained in that way, and that the only way in which we can recall these performances is by the process of this documentation is a typical double bind.[28]

Escaping didactic interpretation, his extraordinary later works on paper addressed the problems of subjectivity within less determined frameworks; these are examined in a later chapter.

28 Mike Parr, quoted in Peter Thorn, "Stutterer on a Mountain – Bashlyk Self Portrait: An interview with Mike Parr", *Museum of Contemporary Art Members' Newsletter* (Sydney), May-June 1993, p. 7.

Lafart versus Pluralism: Doubts about the Efficacy of Art

This double bind was clearly evident to artists. The *Lafart Manifesto,* 1975, was a sheet of red mimeographed paper with text by Mike Parr and Aleks Danko. It was plastered around Sydney in 1975 by the two artists' students at the Tin Sheds, and melodramatically announced: "We have decided to leave post-object art behind because it belongs to the past".[29] Words like "solidarity" reappeared all through the manifesto; in fact, it was a parody of Left political correctness and obviously issued from the experiences Danko, Parr and Tin Sheds colleague Noel Sheridan had accumulated in collective groups over the previous years. Danko and Parr mocked post-object art's timidity: "Post-object art is intolerable; when Klaus Rinke throws bed-pans of water he does so in galleries".[30] The manifesto reflected a general rhetoric of hostility to museums and commercial galleries during the period, but its humour represented something else as well.

Danko and Parr were alert to the potential importance of a critique of Duchamp, such as that made by Daniel Buren: the readymade's fallacy was its obscuring of the institutional and discursive framing conditions that, nevertheless, allowed shifts in the meanings and experiences of ready-made objects.[31] Post-object and conceptual art was vulnerable to two types of criticism: it was tautologous and it took for granted its own institutional neutrality.[32]

Australian art discourse during the 1970s was able to encompass a variety of imperatives. This heterogenous pluralism could become a problem: the evolution of that decade's practice and criticism amounted to a "legitimisation of the subversive". Did the pervasive rhetoric of dissent in art criticism amount to nothing? And who did it serve? Donald Brook, whose criticism was far ahead of its objects, retrospectively observed that art must "always either be compromised by assimilation into some progressive or

29 Aleks Danko and Mike Parr, *Lafart Manifesto*, Tin Sheds, Sydney, 1975, unpaginated.

30 Aleks Danko and Mike Parr, *Lafart Manifesto.*

31 See Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-69: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", *October* n.55, Winter 1990, p.138. As Benjamin Buchloh showed, Daniel Buren's 1969 essay, "*Limites Critiques*", was quite prescient, as was his 1970 essay, "Beware!". See Daniel Buren, "Beware!", *Studio International* v.179 n.920, March 1970, pp.100-104.

32 Catalano criticised Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden's Art & Language texts, accusing the two artists of pedantry and dubious philosophy. See Gary Catalano, *The Bandaged Image: A Study of Australian Artists' Books*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1983.

33 Donald Brook, "From the margin", in *The present and recent past of Australian art and criticism*, special supplement, *Agenda* n.2, p. 9.

34 Aleks Danko, interview with the author, January 1994.

35 Daniel Spoerri (trans. Emmett Williams), *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (Re-Anecdoted Version)*, Something Else Press, New York, 1966.

36 Thomas McEvilley, "Great Walk Talk", in *The Lovers*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1989, p.76.

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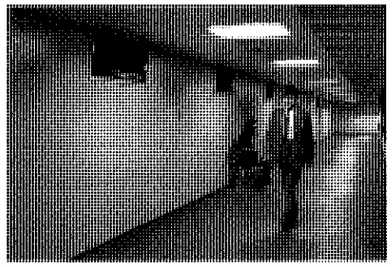

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1:19 Aleks Danko, *Day to Day*, 1974, performance, Mrs Macquarie's Chair (shown) and five other locations around Sydney. Photograph: Louise Samuels. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Bellas Gallery, Brisbane.

1:20 Aleks Danko, *Day to Day*, 1974, performance, underground walkway at Domain Parking Station (shown) and five other locations around Sydney. Photograph: Louise Samuels. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Bellas Gallery, Brisbane.

1:21 Christo & Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, One Million Square Feet, Sydney, Australia*, 1969, erosion control fabric and 36 miles of rope. Co-ordinator: John Kaldor. Photograph courtesy John Kaldor. © Christo 1969.

'Hegelian' doctrine of art history, or else it will be invisibly active in a manner transcending the scope of the art institution".[33]

This was the point at which artists stalled: art itself, as several participants have since noted, was perceived to have ended. Some artists moved into direct political action. Others, including Dale Hickey and Domenico de Clario, started painting again. Parr moved gradually into printmaking and drawing; Danko moved further into the exploration of alternative (often collaborative) modes of production. In *This performance is a mistake*, 1973, Julie Ewington, Robin Ravlich and Danko undressed and swapped clothes, describing their reactions to an audience of approximately 200 people. Danko remembers that although there was much haste and laughter during the event, the performers felt very little confusion because the process of cross-dressing was so matter-of-fact and impersonal.[34]

Danko's later artist's books, such as *Ian Bell will arrive in London January 3, 1974*, 1974, continued this search for the outer limits of personality through enumeration to the point of exhaustion. The book was a journal (one page per day for approximately three months until his friend Ian Bell arrived in London). It was printed on an early xerox copier; its grainy images were harsh and its descriptive soliloquies self-conscious. The relationship between word and image in *Ian Bell will arrive in London January 3, 1974* was initially arbitrary but became closer as the work continued and words became captions. The diary gradually became more formal and austere, until it began to resemble European artist Daniel Spoerri's book, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (Re-Anecdoted Version)*, where Spoerri applied the critical and scholarly apparatus of semiotics to the objects on a table.[35] *Ian Bell will arrive in London January 3, 1974* oscillated between two impulses. Art disappeared into life, leaving the work behind, and Danko's life became a marathon race as he sought to finish his journal so that it could become art.

Another book, *The Chair is not a Tourist*, 1975, documents five performances narrating Danko's doubts about the possibility and efficacy of communication. One of the performances was *Day to Day*, 1974, for which Danko sat blindfolded, gagged, and bound to a chair for one hour in each of six different Sydney city locations, including the underground walkway at The Domain. The book's photographs documented the reactions of passing pedestrians. Its recording of vulnerability had affinities with the mid-1970s performances of Marina Abramovic and Ulay, two European performance artists who visited Australia twice in the later 1970s, travelled in the outback and presented works in Sydney Biennales. In 1975, Marina Abramovic invited a randomly chosen audience from the street in Naples to "express themselves using her body".[36] The result was aggressive and violent: she was stripped, cut with a razor blade, punched, a gun nozzle was thrust into her mouth, and a fight broke out amongst the audience, clearing the hall. Danko did not sympathise with such mono-structural, cathartic performances, which were admired by his colleague Mike Parr, but agreed with the 1978 assertion of Parr that "In Australia I find little knowledge of Happenings and Fluxus. Performance art in the '70s must be seen against this background."[37]

Unlike Parr, Danko misused conceptual art. He did so not because of its potential for purity, but because of its literary possibilities: its useful impersonality; its Kafkaesque clerical bureaucratisation of art; and its near-total *nouveau roman* bracketing of expressive voices. Danko's interest in the preservation of narrative was also based on a revulsion from the monotonous nature of most performances. In the introduction to *Ian Bell will*

arrive in London January 3, 1974, Danko wrote evocatively about the potential of fiction. He quoted Richard Kostelanetz: "Fiction can be most generally defined as a frame filled with a circumscribed world of cohesively self-relating activity... within fictional art is usually some kind of movement from one point to another".[38]

Both Aleks Danko's later installations and Mike Parr's prints of the 1980s developed from a long and distinguished career with performances that were above all theatrical, because performance artists dealing with investigations and revelations of self are always "doing impressions", in the theatrical sense of that word. Parr's audiences, though, were forced into a different complicity – as either voyeurs or traumatised, terrorised subjects – in powerful performances that attempted to remake both artist and audience.

REMAKING INSTITUTIONS: IN OR OUT OF THE GALLERY?

Pluralism and Dependency

The art of the 1970s was characterised by pluralism, but the result of pluralism tended towards a dependence on institutions which were, in turn, occasionally forced to set aside inertia and conservatism to confront the new art. For example, John Kaldor's "Art Project 2", which followed his co-ordination of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's influential and spectacular *Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, One Million Square Feet, Sydney, Australia*, 1969, was a large exhibition selected by European curator Harald Szeemann and titled "I want to leave a nice well-done child here: 20 Australian artists". His exhibition opened at Sydney's Bonython Galleries in April 1971 and at the National Gallery of Victoria in June 1971. It included works as diverse as Brett Whiteley, Tony Woods and William Pidgeon's collaborative painting, *Linked Portrait*, 1971; Mike Parr's *String-Shadow Piece*, 1971; and Melbourne artist Guy Stuart's austere show-stopping wall of nylon and rubberised plastic, *Lattice Full of Holes*, 1971.[39] Public galleries such as the NGV were surprisingly quick to incorporate a few innovative projects like Kaldor's in order to confirm their own authority and prestige or in response to the fierce efforts of individual curators such as Brian Finemore, Daniel Thomas and Jennifer Phipps. Alternative spaces and organisations were allocated the role previously performed by museums or commercial spaces – the accreditation of untried artists. Only a few private galleries were able, gradually, to represent the elusive self surviving within 1970s art as a desirable commodity worthy of their collectors' attention. Art schools quickly adapted to the pluralist 1970s, forming newer academies without plaster casts and, often, without any consistent transmission of technical skills or art history at all; such was my own training at Melhourne's National Gallery School in the early 1970s.

If most experimental art was critical of the museum, it was equally true that much 1970s art could be seen as art only within the museum or the walls of commercial galleries, which were doggedly identified by artists as places where "anything goes". Art largely became what galleries and museums allowed inside their doors. The way this happened confirms the ideologies that underlie the industry of art.

Public Galleries: Representation and Exclusion of New Art

The most radical forms of 1970s art were shown in public gallery survey exhibitions and, more gradually, were promoted by commercial galleries. Certain categories of post-object art, such as installation, now seem more prescient than others in their affinities

37 Mike Parr, "Beyond the Pale: Reflections on Performance Art", *Aspect* v.3 n.4, 1978, p. 6. Happenings were highly unstructured performance/installations; they became widely known in the work of American artist Alan Kaprow from the late 1950s. Fluxus was a loosely organised group of European and American artists, with strong links to avant-garde music, co-ordinated by American George Maciunus. Fluxus was more like a hidden web of connections between otherwise known artists than a conventional art movement. Fluxus artists organised happenings and "actions" – in 1964, for example, Maciunus threatened American police forces with the sabotage of the postal system, city-wide pickets and disruption of mass transit. Aleks Danko's work had many links with Fluxus.

38 Richard Kostelanetz, *Breakthrough Fictioneers*, Something Else Press, New York, 1973, quoted in Aleks Danko, *Ian Bell will arrive in London January 3, 1974*, artist's book, 1974, unpaginated.

39 Brett Whiteley, Tony Woods and William Pidgeon's collaborative painting, *Linked Portrait*, 1971, was an isolated and unusual work in the exhibition because of its figuration, each artist's relatively conservative aesthetic stance, and the fact (unusual in each artist's oeuvre) of its collaborative manufacture. In the early 1970s, Melbourne artist Guy Stuart produced a remarkable series of wall-hanging, net-like "installations", or Lattices, that await revaluation of their importance. *Lattice*, 1971, is titled *Pigment Catch* in Szeemann's catalogue.

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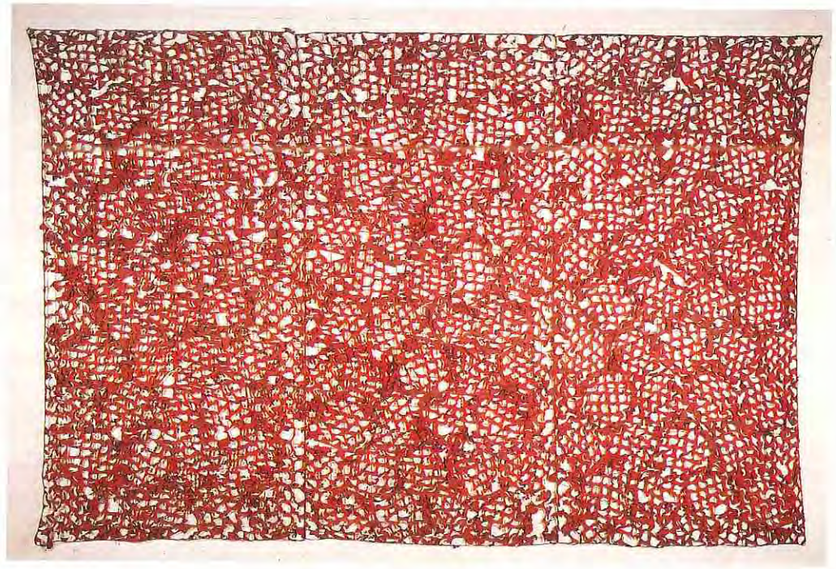

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with the art of the 1990s. Far from being too radical for exhibition, even this work was represented at the time as consistent with previous practice. Autonomous and self-contained, it conveniently seemed to resist precise definition. Critic, curator and film-director Lizzie Borden observed that the term "conceptual art" was an imprecise category for the multitude of works which claimed to elevate concept over material realisation.[40] She distinguished between different modes of dematerialised art: documentations of past actions; performances; and text-based art. Each of these forms was shown in public and commerical galleries. For example, Robert Rooney's documentations, *Scorched Almonds*, 1970, and *Holden Park 1 & 2*, 1970, were shown in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, as part of "Project 8: Robert Rooney", during 1975. A performance by Kevin Mortensen, *The Seagull Salesman, his stock and visitors*, was seen at Bruce Pollard's Melbourne gallery, Pinacotheca, during 1972. Terry Smith's and Robert Dixon's text-based Art & Language piece, *Project for a "Political Art" Poster*, 1974-75, was shown at the 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial Exhibition. The look of art was conferred on radical forms by the framing of the gallery space, which was itself used as a kind of "unique book", in Lizzie Borden's phrase.[41]

The state gallery or publicly funded art space, in particular, was neither neutral nor an innocent site and was far more than just a convenient forum. Performances made their appearance in place of pictures executed by hand. Instead of paintings, and at least as authoritative, the artist was available through documentations or, in performances, actually present. Documentations were occasionally collected by museums, and support seems to have been relatively consistent, if small in absolute size. Examination of accession dates for post-object art works in Australian collections shows a fairly constant purchase or donation pattern, even during the painting-dominated early 1980s. In fact, artists hoped that major survey shows would legitimise the status of radical art in the face of private-sector tardiness. From London, Charles Harrison observed in 1969 that:

40 Lizzie Borden, "Three modes of Conceptual Art", *Artforum* v.10 n.10, June 1972, p. 69.

41 Lizzie Borden, "Three modes", *Artforum* v.10 n.10, p. 69.

1:22 Guy Stuart, *Lattice Full of Holes*, 1971, mixed media, including rubberised material, glass fibre, pigments in casein, 350 x 525 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria. Courtesy Australian Galleries, Melbourne.
This work was exhibited in "I want to leave a nice well-done child here: 20 Australian artists", curated by Harald Szeemann as John Kaldor's "Art Project 2", Bonython Galleries, Sydney, April 1971, and travelled to the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, in June 1971.

> Perhaps the London showing of "When Attitudes become Form" will act as an irritant and will serve to show how inadequately we are prepared to draw benefit from even the London-based exhibitors, let alone those American and Continental artists whose work we need so desperately to see in depth.[42]

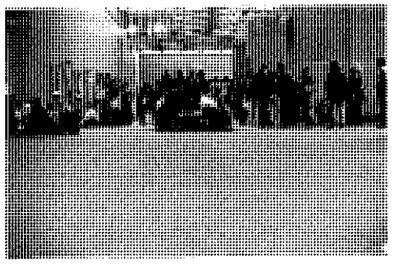
42 Charles Harrison, "Against Precedents", *Studio International* v.178 n.914, September 1969, p. 94.

The dominant style of the 1960s – formalist abstraction, which was also known as Colour Field painting – continued to be exhibited in local commercial galleries, as a survey of gallery notices demonstrates. This art looked alternately lofty, unintelligible and intimidating; or pretty and very up-to-date. It fitted well into large office buildings. In Melbourne, "The Field", the National Gallery of Victoria's inaugural 1968 exhibition at its new St Kilda Road site, marked the end of that style's exclusive interest to many participants. "The Field" included only two artists, Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, whose work demonstrated the dematerialisation of the art object. However, neither their art nor mention of any such tendency appeared in the three exhibition catalogue essays. Before the NGV's commencement of the Survey program (of small-scale solo exhibitions by experimental artists) in 1978, the small gallery on its third floor was one of two principal public spaces for contemporary art in Melbourne. A low-ceilinged anteroom adjacent to the permanent collection, this space was best described as marginal; the institution, especially after 1977, implied that contemporary art – obstructed by pillars and compressed hanging – was by nature best confined to a cramped ivory tower.

The stylistic alibi of the 1970s in institutions was, fortuitously, Cool. Sensitive opacity masked artists' otherwise forbidden utterances, whether political or personal (and, remember, the political was personal). When political content could be neither trivialised nor controlled, or when gratuitous exclusion was allowed to disrupt the seamless neutrality of museums and commercial galleries, certain types of advanced art were shown the door. This was despite the efforts of patrons like John Kaldor or progressive curatorial staff like Jennifer Phipps at the National Gallery of Victoria and Tom McCullough at the Mildura Regional Gallery. Exclusion was based, according to gallery trustees, on aesthetic grounds: either artistic merit was the question, or the museum was deemed to be above politics. Appeals for pragmatism and common sense, the two favourite motifs, justified the withdrawal of support from the most radical contemporary art. A refusal to purchase the new art was also justified by its alleged unsuitability for museum display. Establishment critics attempted an immediate relegation of 1970s art forms to the past-tense basement. Reviewing the NGV's 1973 conceptual art exhibition, "Object and Idea", Patrick McCaughey asserted that it was "a pallid, provincial and undernourished cousin of New York art of two years ago and more ... powered by a foreign rhetoric and irrelevant to present conditions in Australian art".[43]

43 Patrick McCaughey, "If you call it art let it so be judged", *The Age*, September 12, 1973, p. 2.

In 1975, the Art & Language exhibitions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria were hanned after protests from politicians and visiting American curators. The Art & Language exhibition in Melbourne was held instead at the adjoining National Gallery Art School, following threats from William Liebermann of the New York Museum of Modern Art, who was curating the concurrent touring Blockbuster "Modern Masters". These were memorable events, provoking debates about cultural imperialism in Art & Language's simultaneous forums. Later that year, as noted above, a Domenico de Clario installation was removed from the National Gallery of Victoria. Protests by artists in the Gallery foyer ensued, but it was doubtful whether any substan-



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44 Bernice Murphy, "Australian Art Abroad", *Art and Australia* v.3 n.4, April-June 1976, p. 332.

tial relationship between the Gallery and contemporary artists developed as a consequence, apart from the Survey shows mounted by new curator Robert Lindsay in the late 1970s. Certainly, the promised annexe for contemporary art never materialised.

It was also possible to present a picture of contemporary Australian art so partial and complacent as to misrepresent its direction. When the exhibition "Ten Australians" toured Europe in 1975, it included works by David Aspden, Sydney Ball, Fred Cress, Roger Kemp, Fred Williams, George Haynes, Donald Laycock, Michael Taylor, John Firth-Smith and Ron Robertson-Swann. Nine painters, one sculptor, no women, no post-object or radical art. Bernice Murphy reviewed the exhibition in justifiably scathing terms:

> Tbe most distinctive recent features of Australian art in the mid-1970s – the widening of options, the dispersion of the avant-garde from any agreed location or similar objectives into a diaspora of various, and often mutually incompatible modes of activity – were quite obscured by this exhibition ... I think that, ironically, even within the staked-out territory of the catalogue essay's discussion ... the problem of exclusion still looms.[44]

To a significant extent, women were under-represented in major exhibitions in public galleries, though not to the degree indicated in "Ten Australians". Of the 40 artists in "The Field", three were women. In the 1981 Australian Sculpture Triennial, approximately 50 of the 220 invited artists were women. Protests connected with gender balance in the 1976 Sydney Biennale were partly responsible for the formatiou of the Artworkers Union. At the Art Gallery of New South Wales' "Australian Perspecta '81", curator Bernice Murphy included 23 women out of a total of 64 artists.

Commercial and Alternative Galleries: Exceptions in a Sea of Conservatism

Commercial galleries in Europe and America were able to represent artists working in virtually all advanced art forms. During the autumn of 1975, for example, Daniel Buren showed with John Weber, Joseph Beuys with Ronald Feldman, Hans Haacke with John Weber, Dan Flavin with Leo Castelli and Jannis Kounellis with Sonnabend. However in Australia, at approximately the same time, little post-object or alternative art was shown commercially to any great extent, except in Melbourne by Bruce Pollard at Pinacotheca and Georges Mora at Tolarno, and in Sydney by Geoffrey Legge and Frank Watters at Watters. Pinacotheca, as Clive Murray-White observed, had "the air of New York; if you took a photograph of your work, it would look like a major international avant-garde show".[45]

Other artists attempted to bypass both public galleries and commercial spaces, forming collectives and loose associations such as the Women's Art Movement in the mid-1970s and, later, the Artworkers Union. Co-operative galleries, like Inhibodress in Sydney between 1970 and 1972, and publicly-funded galleries, such as the George Paton Gallery at the Student Union of the University of Melbourne and the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide from the same time, identified themselves closely with alternative groups and their labyrinthine organisational processes. They established themselves, with Pinacotheca and Watters, as the most important venues for progressive art. Electronic media, video, and postal art (such as "Trans Art 3" at Inhibodress in 1972 or "The Letter Show" at the George Paton Gallery in 1974) were all utilised by a wide cross-section of artists.

The financial, logistical and emotional demands on artists participating in alternative

45 Clive Murray-White, quoted in Jonathan Sweet, *Pinacotheca: 1967-73*, Prendergast, Melbourne, 1989, p. 20.

1:23 Artists' sit-in at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1975, following the gallery's removal of Domenico de Clario's installation, *Elemental Landscapes*. Photograph: Brecon Walsh.

1:24-27 Kevin Mortensen, Mike Brown and Russell Dreever, *The Opening Leg Show Party Bizarre*, 1972, performance/event, Pinacotheca, Melbourne. Photograph: Ian Wallace.

1:28 Micky Allan, *The Live-In Show*, installation/performance, Ewing and George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne, 1978. Courtesy Watters Gallery, Sydney.

1:29 Aleks Danko and Colin Little, *Laughing Wall*, 1972, installation, Tin Sheds, Sydney University. Photograph: Sam Bienstock.

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organisations were often prohibitive. At Pinacotheca, Bruce Pollard experimented with collective direction, insisting that artists spend some time behind the gallery's front desk. In 1972 Pollard travelled overseas, leaving the running of the gallery and exhibition program to the artists. By all accounts, the experience was not completely positive. Robert Rooney remembers several terse encounters with the uninitiated and unfortunate members of the public who strayed up the narrow lane at Waltham Place, Richmond.[46] When Pollard returned, he canvassed the continuation of this policy. However, the artists, disenchanted with the grind, boredom and routine of gallery direction, preferred that he resume control.

For most artists, experiences with alternative spaces eventually led to mainstream gallery exposure in the following decade. These venues were, in effect, a showcase for artists and the hunting ground of curators and dealers. They were therefore tolerated by the art establishment: Patrick McCaughey referred approvingly to the George Paton as "a more effective irritant to the Establishment than other venues in Melbourne", and consistently defended the George Paton Gallery when it was under threat.[47] The Tin Sheds, where Mike Parr and Aleks Danko, amongst others, taught, occupied a similar role within the Power Institute at Sydney University. A crucial, and often aesthetically disastrous aspect of such spaces, was their striving for unmediated access to the public, often through confused, "democratic" exhibition selection by the artists themselves.

Public spaces such as the George Paton and Tin Sheds were conventionally considered peripheral to the state galleries in each capital city, as they constantly attempted to incorporate advanced art forms within a tradition which preferred "pure" aesthetic value. Alternative spaces were, however, by no means the preserve solely of artists working in post-object forms. A review of the 1970s exhibition records of the George Paton Gallery demonstrates that although painting exhibitions by young artists were in a distinct minority, the program was surprisingly eclectic.

46 Author's conversation with Robert Rooney, November 1989. Author's conversation with Bruce Pollard, November 1989.

47 Patrick McCaughey, "University or Airport", *Age Monthly Review*, March 1986, p. 13.

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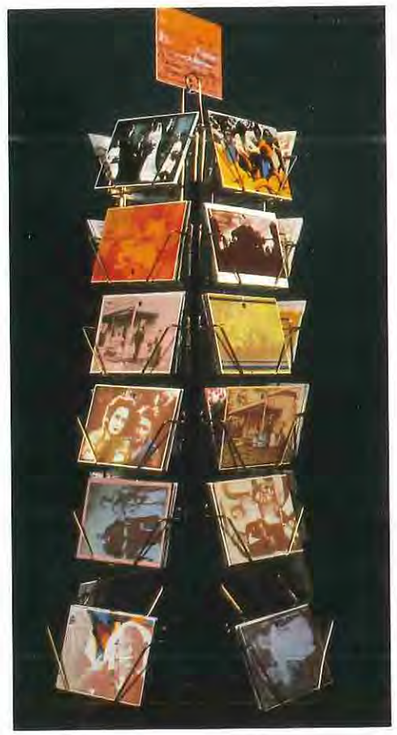
Vivienne Binns: Community Art

Representation of new art forms by curators and galleries, while far from overwhelming, nevertheless diverted new art from more radical formations, including community art projects that removed the distinction between artist and unskilled amateur. Vivienne Binns and members of the Blacktown community collaborated on *Postcard Rack*, 1980; this work was extracted from a larger community project, *Mothers' Memories Others' Memories*. Executed in conjunction with 38 suburban women, it began when Binns and



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48 Vivienne Binns, artist's statement, *Mothers' Memories Others' Memories*, p. 2.

49 Vivienne Binns, quoted in Donald Brook, "Socially Engaged Art – Nothing Special", *Artlink* v.2 n.2, May/June 1982, p. 9.

1:30 Vivienne Binns and members of the Blacktown, NSW, community, *Postcard Rack*; *Mothers' Memories Others' Memories*, 1981, wire, enamel, steel, vitreous enamel, relief on photo-screen, 90 x 27 x 27 cm. Presented to the people of Blacktown. Collection: Blacktown Library, Blacktown, NSW. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

1:31 Kevin Mortensen, *The Delicatessen*, 1975, installation/performance, 70 Langtree Avenue, Mildura, 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial. Photograph: the artist.

a friend "had the idea of swapping mothers for a day. Instead of doing a duty call on our own mother, we'd visit the other's mother".[48] This was an alternative way of exploring mother/daughter relationships. Binns was aware of the way her work was subsumed immediately into the very system she was manoeuvring outside; *Postcard Rack* was acquired by the Australian National Gallery in 1982:

> The biggest contradiction that I operate in is that my work can be seen as very nicely sustaining the status quo. It can be a bleed-off for excess energy, or unhappiness, a Sunday afternoon activity, a very nice thing to do in your spare time. But on the other hand it can be the means by which people can have more access to their expression, their creativity, and I see that as enabling people to have more access to their own sense of power.[49]

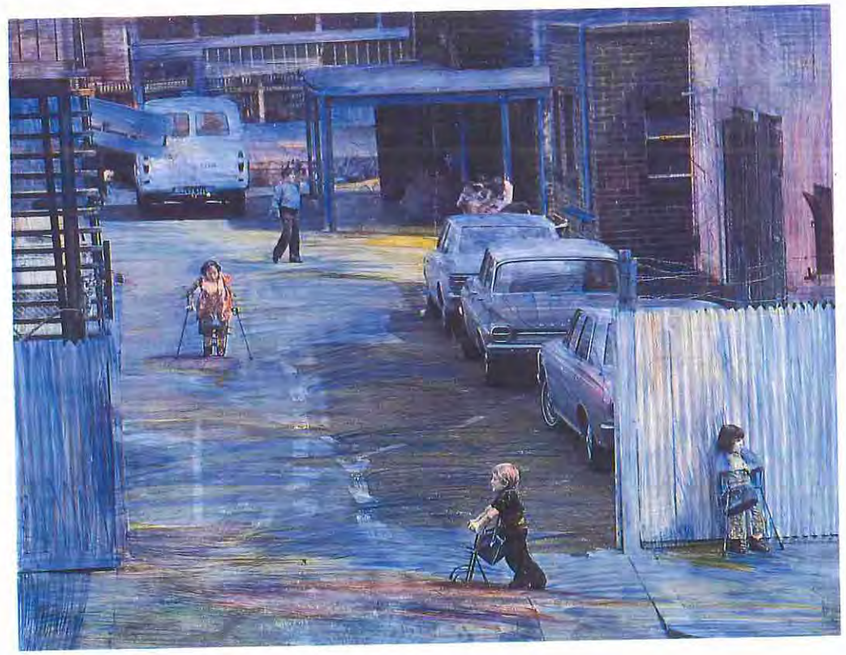
Binns could see that art remained an object of cultural consumption, because galleries and museums were able to offer an audience as well as patronage. Against the grain of artists' radical intentions, art retained its "presence", and so the shape of history retained its seamlessness. The assumption that the purchase of a work could disarm its content was dubious. Artists in the late 1980s, like Peter Tyndall, would make the circulation of their work, within the systems of private and public patronage, an important element in their art.

The Mildura Sculpture Triennials: Encyclopedias of Confusion

Until the Sydney Biennales from 1979 onwards, the most important museum representations of advanced art were the Mildura Sculpture Triennials. Provincial collectors' indifference meant that many artists, like Marr Grounds or John Davis, established major critical reputations from shows like these long before they began to make large sales through commercial galleries. Both were included in successive Mildura exhibitions.

Later observers noted the lack of discrimination in these encyclopedic shows. Co-operation from officials and communities outside the Mildura Regional Gallery was required for many projects realised under the auspices of the Triennials. Put together on a tiny budget by Director Tom McCullough and overworked assistants, the Mildura experience replicated other large sculpture surveys of the time, such as "Sonsbeek '71", at Sonsbeek in the Netherlands. The Mildura Triennial was unruly and marked by confusion; it also coincided with motorcycle races. Exhibitions like the Triennial were characterised by distinct problems: they usually incurred massive budget over-runs; this meant they often lacked adequate infrastructure to ensure proper installation or security. Thus, they took place amidst an atmosphere of crisis and breakdown. Artists who participated in such events received either a minimal fee or nothing at all. More often, they poured their own money into ensuring the correct installation of their work, effectively subsidising the showing of advanced art. Museum spaces – outdoor or indoor – were unsuitable for many site-specific works. In fact, the 1978 Triennial ended when the Director was dramatically sacked by the local Mildura Council; the book McCullough had produced on the Sculpturescape was burned.

Tom McCullough's removal from the directorship followed long-running local controversy over inclusions in Sculpture Triennials, particularly works such as Kevin Mortensen's *Delicatessen*, the effect of which depended not only on a site in the town, but on elaborate deception of its local audience. From the vantage-point of the media-aware, mercantile 1990s, the Mildura Triennials marked a phase in the increasing public role of



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1970s – a diaristic, often community-art oriented activity with strong links to counter- and sub-cultures – yet her choice of photographic means – collage, and hand-tinting with water-colours, oil-paint or pencils, onto silver gelatin prints – were essentially coloured by a feminist-influenced adaptation of previous genres in the history of photography. Aside from a refusal of the photographic community's exclusive demands for finely crafted prints, the most obvious aspect of such work was its attempt to reach a wider audience than the avant-garde and its friends.

Art & Language member Ian Burn argued in 1975 that truly radical art practice amounted to the dissolution of art, artists and authorship. "What can you expect to challenge in the real world with "colour", "edge", "process", systems, modules, etc., as your arguments? Can you be more than a manipulated puppet if these are your 'professional' arguments?"[53]

Burn emphasised the complicity of post-object artists in the perpetuation of a specialised luxury-goods industry. He accused young artists of careerism, of an acceptance of their alienated relationship to power, and of reification of myths about individuality which served to disguise late capitalism's functions. Terry Smith was just as hostile, accusing American minimalist megastars such as Donald Judd of subservience to craft values, Carl Andre of misunderstood Marxism, and Sol LeWitt of decorative formalism. Smith's essay for the 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial catalogue was aimed at an Australian audience; he was damning local artists by implication. He emphasised that post-object and conceptual art had not, despite its radical form, dealt with truly political issues: "Moving in crates of art-historical precedence doesn't alter your economic function, your base-structural relationship to your means of production and distribution, your predictability ..."[54]

Conceptual artists were guilty, as Smith observed, of confusing art with life. Frequent

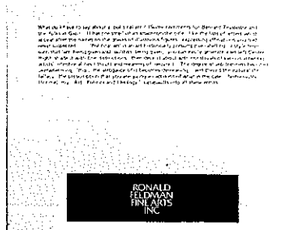
53 Ian Burn, "Art market, affluence and degradation" [1975], in Amy Baker Sandback (ed.), *Looking Critically: 21 Years of Artforum*, UMI, Ann Arbor, 1984, p. 175.

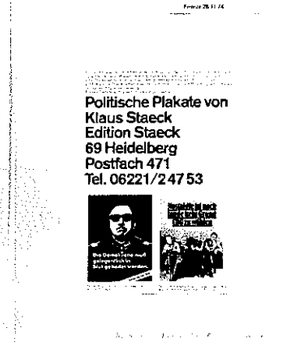
54 Terry Smith, "Art Criticism/Self Criticism", in Tom McCullough (curator), *6th Mildura Sculpture Exhibition*, p. 5.

1:32 Micky Allan, *Yooralla at 20 Past 3*, 1978, silver gelatin photograph hand-tinted with water-colours and pencils, 27.7 x. 35.2 cm. Courtesy Watters Gallery, Sydney.

1:33 Micky Allan, *The Family Room*, 1982, oil on silver gelatin photograph, 300 x 100 cm. Courtesy Watters Gallery, Sydney.

1:34 Terry Smith and Robert Dixon, *Project for a "Political Art" poster*, 1974-75, mixed media on panel, 4 panels of 80 x 40 cm. This work was exhibited at the 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial.





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PROJECTS

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complaints about the demand that art be overtly political in its signification testify to the frustration felt by other artists. Of radical 1970s culture, 1980s postmodern cultural theorist Meaghan Morris later remembered:

> a surveillance system so absolute that in the name of the personal-political, every-day life became a site of pure semiosis. And this monitoring system functioned constantly to determine what styles, which gestures, could count as good ("valid", "sound") politics, and which ones could not.[55]

This pervasive political correctness was to be replicated in the 1990s: *plus ça change ...*

Out the Door: Do Artists Learn From History?

Did the arrival of New Wave, neo-expressionism and postmodern theory obliterate the 1970s? When Peter Cripps curated "Masterpieces Out of the Seventies: Tyndall; Tillers; Cripps; Nixon; Schoenbaum" at the Monash University Gallery in 1983, he observed wistfully that "Australian Art of the 1970s seems to be a difficult art for historians and one wonders whether it's to be forgotten".[56] With the arrival of neo-expressionism at the start of the 1980s, by contrast, conservative critics rejoiced that art was no longer obliged to wage an avant-garde struggle for ideological purity.

In 1984, Power Institute Professor Virginia Spate published a paper in *Art & Text* called "Whatever Happened to the Seventies?"[57] According to Spate, the rigorous, unassimilable issues raised by 1970s art were threatened by a mudslide of frivolous, latently formalist criticism and art, identified by the extremes of disco-oriented postmodernism and oil-paint dominated neo-expressionism. As Spate pointed out, many neo-expressionist strategies – quotation, parody, juxtaposition and disjunction – were the same forms used by socially critical artists of the 1970s such as the poster collectives with their populist, activist imagery – Redback Graphix, for example – and Micky Allan. Her criticism was directed at the promoters of heroic, usually male painters or imported celebrities like English neo-expressionist painter (and, for several years during the 1980s, Dean of the School of Art at Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts) John Walker. More obliquely, she was addressing the sidelining of radical 1970s art which, she was aware, had been definitively effected by the discourse of *Art & Text* and its charismatic editor, Paul Taylor. Taylor, more than any other Australian critic, predicted the sea-changes of the 1980s through his understanding of the importance of Andy Warhol's postmodernity and his comprehension of the art world as a spectacle. The celebratory modes of 1970s feminism were swept aside by the postmodern criticism of the new decade.

At its most irresponsible end, the 1980s in Australian art saw the trivialisation of the previous decade's key debates, identifying them with "the past". Post-feminist [*sic*] filmmaker Lezli-Ann Barrett, for example, explained that "I don't want to be possessed by a man and I equally don't want to be possessed by feminism".[58] Most 1980s artists, better than their predecessors, recognised Donald Brook's valedictory 1982 comment on the 1970s: "art, as it is ordinarily conceived, does not have any prompting for social action".[59] Many were excessively eager to affirm the corollary – that institutional art, the art of galleries – had no special political role at all. This perverse aspiration, or its naive opposite, monopolised the 1980s but came into question again in the 1990s. Truly, progress is a myth. In the forest of signs, which is not neatly measured in decades, travellers perpetually reinvent truth.

55 Meaghan Morris, "Politics Now (Anxieties of a petty-bourgeois intellectual)", in her *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Post-Modernism*, Verso, London, 1988, p. 178.

56 Peter Cripps, catalogue essay, in *Masterpieces Out of the Seventies: Tyndall; Tillers; Cripps; Nixon; Schoenbaum*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 1983, unpaginated.

57 Virginia Spate, "Whatever Happened to the Seventies?", *Art & Text* n.14, Winter 1984, pp. 75-79.

58 Lezli-Ann Barrett, quoted in Deb Verhoeven, "Fostering Festering Feminisms", *Agenda* v.2 n.1, August 1988, p. 23.

59 Donald Brook, "Socially Engaged Art - Nothing Special", *Artlink* v.2 n.2, May/June 1982, p. 9.