Metropolis: Postmodernism and the late 1980s

METROPOLIS: POSTMODERNISM AND THE LATE 1980s

Metropolis: Artificiality, Disorganisation and the Transnational Marketplace

Contemporary Australian art exists as part of an alluring transnational marketplace which, like a postmodern Metropolis, is characterised by speed and disorganisation. This marketplace flows across national borders because of its global interdependency, assuming the image and function of an organised international market linked by electronic technologies that abolish time and space.[1] The network of ideas and information transmitted by the dominant economies of the West constitutes, as Raymond Williams observed, the true contemporary metropolis.[2] The "centre" is not a single city as such but the network of international institutions based in cities such as New York.

If the multi-sited metropolis of international art was characterised by artificiality and speed, it also resonated, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with nostalgia for an earlier modernist stage of urban experience – for the 1920s, for example, when Berlin was the avant-garde crossroads of Europe, and Moscow was the locus of the future. In 1990 Christos Joachimedes and Norman Rosenthal, curators of the influential 1982 exhibition, "Zeitgeist", staged its sequel, "Metropolis" (a title bringing to mind Fritz Lang's expressionist film), attempting an overview of contemporary art. The motifs of artificiality in "Metropolis", like other international surveys of contemporary art, were exclusively those of urban experience rather than art about the natural world.[3] The postmodern insistence on artificiality converted metropolitan life into images of almost exclusively ironic experience and this same artificiality reassembled the second-hand reality communicated by the mass media and mechanical reproductions. The art in such international exhibitions was marked by the impact of urban life and the dominating influence of information media such as television. This influence was deliberately reflected in an all-pervasive irony and materialism. The subject and form of this art was passivity, exhaustion and consumption. The art of "Metropolis" and, in an Australian equivalent, that of the 1993 Perspecta exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, often resembled transmogrified furniture, reflected consumer and leisure interests, and adapted retail display techniques in the pursuit of spectacle.

The desire for a pure language of painting had been internationally replaced in the late 1980s by the desire to surpass "natural" meaning. This excess was sought by incorporating the signification of consumption – by collectors, museums and art magazines – inside the frame of the art object. Aleks Danko was a particularly important artist because his works bridged the gap between the 1970s and the present, and between the most crucial aspects of international and Australian art. The conceptual operations of his works recapitulated the radical dilemmas and weighed the consequences of the representational violence that marked the "end of art" in the late 1960s. On the other hand, they asserted his absolute awareness of the place of art in the cultural food chain.

International and Australian art during the later 1980s was similarly self-reflexive; as well as an obsession with artificiality the decade saw artists such as Peter Tyndall agonise over the heightened awareness of art's status as a luxury commodity. Whereas this self-consciousness had previously been of incidental interest, except to artists like Aleks Danko, it now became one of contemporary art's main motifs. Susan Norrie's paintings exemplified the resolution of this cultural dilemma through the hyperalertness of consumer fetishism.

1 For an account of electronic, urban disorganisation see Paul Virilio, "The Overexposed City", *Zone v.1 n.2*, 1987, pp. 14-31.

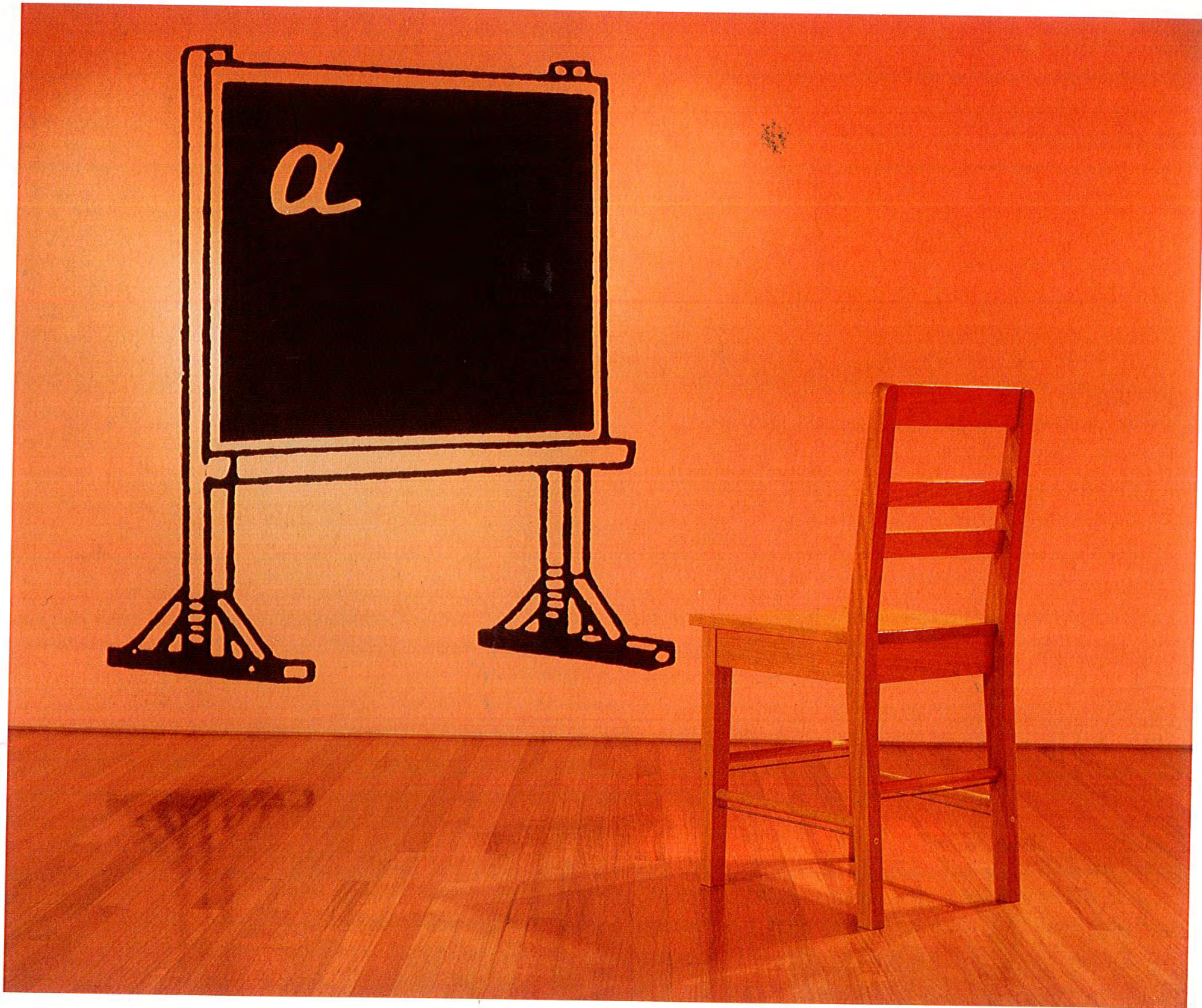
2 Raymond Williams, "Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism" [1985], reprinted in his *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 38.

3 See Paul Virilio, "Perspectives of Real Time", in Christos Joachimedes and Norman Rosenthal (curators), *Metropolis: International Art Exhibition*, Berlin, 1991, Rizzoli, New York, 1991, pp. 59-64.

Previous page: detail of **4:2**.

4:1 Aleks Danko, *"What are you doing boy?"*, 1991, installation, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. Photograph: Warwick Page. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

4:1



4:2

Aleks Danko: Travesties of the Museum

Aleks Danko's art was profoundly and precociously shaped in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and from that period onwards he elaborated certain themes with enormous consistency and will. If he located very early, in the works discussed in Chapter 1, the issues that he would then persistently address, his later works were equally marked by their origin in the "Year Zero" of culture's crisis in the late 1960s.

Much of Danko's work was a dramatisation of crisis in visual form. The resolution that this enactment took was intimately connected with artistic strategies of deception centred upon the economy of the museum – whether present or in hiding – and thus upon the establishment, conservation and dissipation of cultural capital and value.[4] Thus, Aleks Danko neither accepted the illusion of art's ability to perpetually reinvent itself, nor did he assume the false consciousness of the avant-garde's continued relevance. He made outsider art.

Danko's iconography was dominated by motifs of vulnerability, fiction, deceit and, above all, humour. He noted that "Humour is a very trusted servant. It allows the audience a point of entry; it means they can come to the party and not know why."[5] The paradoxical combination of near-total museological professionalism with a fluid notion of identity was seen in the artist's erratic relationship to the more conventional signs of

4 See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's marvellous "Conceptual Art 1962-69: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", *October* n.55, Winter 1990, pp. 105-143.

5 Aleks Danko, interview with the author, December 1993.

4:2 Aleks Danko, *Pomona 1957*, 1992, installation, Noosa Regional Art Gallery, Noosa. Photograph: Mark Oss-Emer. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

authorship (editioning and signing). Danko did not sign his works until the mid-1990s.

The quotes of *To Give Pleasure, 1985*, 1985, were drawn from texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet and reappeared in a 1994 installation, *Zen Made in Australia*, which also incorporated images from a turn-of-the-century window-dresser's manual that taught the procedures for manufacturing *papier mâché* columns and rabbits. *To Give Pleasure* also contained two portraits in installation form of close friends and artists with whom Danko had taught: *John Nixon (Portrait), 1985*, 1985, and *In the Absence of Folly (for Tony Clark)*, 1985. If Sydney critic John McDonald, in an on-going feud with Nixon, identified Danko's simulations with the disrespect of travesty, he underestimated the sincere ambivalence and complexity of Danko's intentions.[6] Danko responded with a letter to *Art Monthly*'s editor, which commented of the *John Nixon (Portrait), 1985*, that "The work is composed of a series of borrowings from his work and is composed in such a way as to re-echo his strategies".[7]

6 John McDonald, "Is there no serious criticism here?", *Art Monthly* n.1, June 1987, pp. 4-6.

7 Aleks Danko, unpublished letter to the editor, Peter Townsend, June 4 , 1987, artist's copy.

The simulation of his friends' art was consistent with an understanding that there were no new objects to be made. A reconstruction of works by Nixon and Clark enabled Danko to borrow two diametrically different conceptions of originality and history within one over-arching installation. The elements in *No 28 – from Dialogues with a New Window-Dresser – Harvest*, 1989, at Store 5 in Melbourne, represented a catalogue of abstract painting's neo-modernist tropes and, implicitly, an oblique commentary on the history of installation art. The tiny alternative space's half-open door represented the supposed dialectical inclusiveness of avant-garde art. A pitchfork piercing the blue painting signalled the modernist monochrome. A drawing of a cow on brown paper with its head framed by rifle sights and framed by real brooms alluded to 1980s critiques of representational modes. An empty picture frame represented the conceptual boundaries suggested by the importation into art of motifs from theory such as French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida's *parergon*, or frame. Finally, a cup filled with smelly creosote suggested *Arte Povera* and installation art.

Danko's later installations, such as *What are you doing boy?*, 1991, reflect Daniel Spoerri's 1960s domestic Fluxus topography in *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (Re-Anecdoted Version)*. The format of the enlarged illustrations mirrored the typography and drawings in Spoerri's book.[8] Around three walls, mural-sized red-edged copies of the illustrations from a Russian school textbook showed a schoolboy at play and school. Blackboards, chairs and the boy in knickerbockers suggested a view from childhood: the discipline imposed on children; a conflict between the exile culture of his Ukrainian parents and the Anglicised Adelaide where he grew up.[9]

8 Daniel Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (Re-Anecdoted Version)*.

9 For an illuminating assesment of this work, see Robert Rooney, "The eyes of childhood", *The Weekend Australian*, August 24-25, 1991.

Danko can be compared to American conceptual artist Bruce Nauman. The artists' combinations of black humour, parody, minimalism and pain required deliberate stylistic inconsistency. Nauman videoed himself dressed as a tortured clown and constructed time-based neon sculptures; the Airwick air-fresheners of a room in Danko's installation, *Pomona 1957*, 1992, fulfilled the same function as, in another installation, diagrams borrowed from William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*. This unequivocal inconsistency allowed an intuition of the nexus between aesthetics and power, and was the reason for both Nauman's and Danko's interest in the idea of "taste": the consumption of art was, after all, inextricably caught up with systems of power, social class and gender. The site of these intersections was the museum of art.

The artist's Melbourne installation, *Taste*, 1988, overlaid an identification of aesthetic

hierarchies with a subliminal historical pedigree from academic art history. The collection of comic heads on stands contemplating a funky fluorescent sculpture was, in fact, a reference to Hogarth's description of aesthetic hierarchies in *The Analysis of Beauty*. The cartoon face (which also appeared on Danko's business card) was a detail from the border of a Hogarth engraving.[10] In the central tableau, sculpted figures crowded a workshop. Different types of figurative language were on display: masterpieces of ancient sculpture; odd assortments of figures; anatomical diagrams; and a story-board sequence of a human head drawn in different ways (one of which was the cartoon head). Hogarth's assertion that he and the connoisseurs were at war took on contemporary currency; according to Danko, Hogarth's drawing immediately reminded him of the paintings of Jenny Watson, Jean-Michel Basquiat and A. R. Penck.[11] If there was no clear-cut division between modes of representation, then Danko's installations were, from the 1980s onwards, saturated with images of rhetoric and battle.

10 Danko found this image in Joseph Burke (ed. and introduction), *William Hogarth: Analysis of Beauty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1955, p. 65.

11 Aleks Danko, interview with the author, December 1993.

Danko's works became progressively more single-minded, allowing him to present ideas with the calculated violence that perfectly mimicked the late 20th century. In *Pomona 1957*, an erotic Mills & Boon-style catalogue essay combined with air fresheners in a symbolic economy of hygiene and evacuation. Danko's consumer syntax and interventions at the entrance and exit to the Noosa Regional Gallery, where the work was installed, suggested the logic of this enterprise – the construction of a temple of thought to mask a violent interrogation of our sense of location in the world. Reason did not eradicate darkness because, clearly, the flip side of Virtue's coin was Terror.

Aleks Danko's works gradually distanced themselves from the orthodoxy of the readymade. *Zen Made in Australia*, 1994, alluded, of course, to the question of whether installation can ever be more than window-dressing. Installed at the University of Melbourne Museum of Art in 1994, the use of objects from the University's collection (including applied art such as furniture) raised the same issue: was installation no more than a covert simulation of curating? This uncertainty disguised Danko's contamination of the gallery. He mimicked art to liquidate the remnants of traditional aesthetic experience. He constructed a travesty of the art institution just as he fabricated, without malice, imitations of the art of his friends. His mimicry was a twisted version of minimalism – an endpoint in the immensely complicated dematerialisation of meaning.

Aleks Danko's installations referred to a crisis in representation, well rehearsed in much current art and paramount in art since the late 1960s. Did Danko aspire to the systematic presentation of a system of knowledge or theory? I think, instead, that his world was regimented by signs illustrating the arbitrariness of aesthetic taste and that its visuality was linked with violence. The over-riding metaphors in *Zen Made in Australia* were of darkness, misrecognition and reading – the responses of an intellectual in exile. The art museum's invaluable institutional structures and resources were incorporated into a single-minded, insistently resonant fragmentation of vision.

4:3

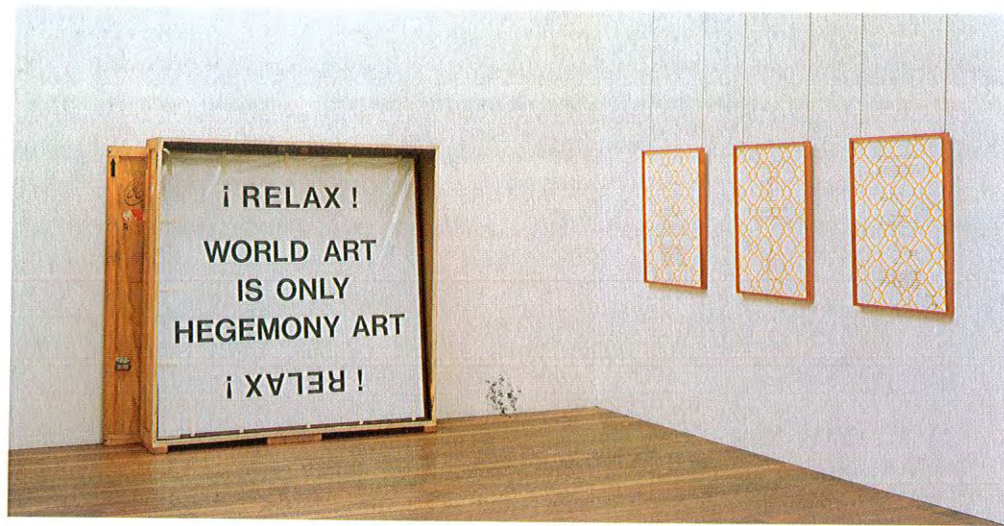
Title:	*detail* *A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/ someone looks at something ...*
Medium:	*A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/ someone looks at something ...* CULTURAL CONSUMPTION PRODUCTION
Date:	– 1988–1990 –
Artist:	Peter Tyndall
Courtesy:	Anna Schwartz Gallery

Peter Tyndall's installation appeared as part of an exhibition, titled *¡Relax!*, at Sydney's Yuill/Crowley Gallery in 1990.

Peter Tyndall: The Circulation of Art

Tyndall's subject was the circulation of art; his installations and paintings described the way we look at art in galleries and, more recently, in the forums of international museums. His project – to render visible the viewer's relation to art – was similar to Danko's and his belief in the critical reconstruction of culture was utopian. Tyndall's work, therefore, was both modernist in its gently dated, didactic optimism and postmodern in its awareness

4:3

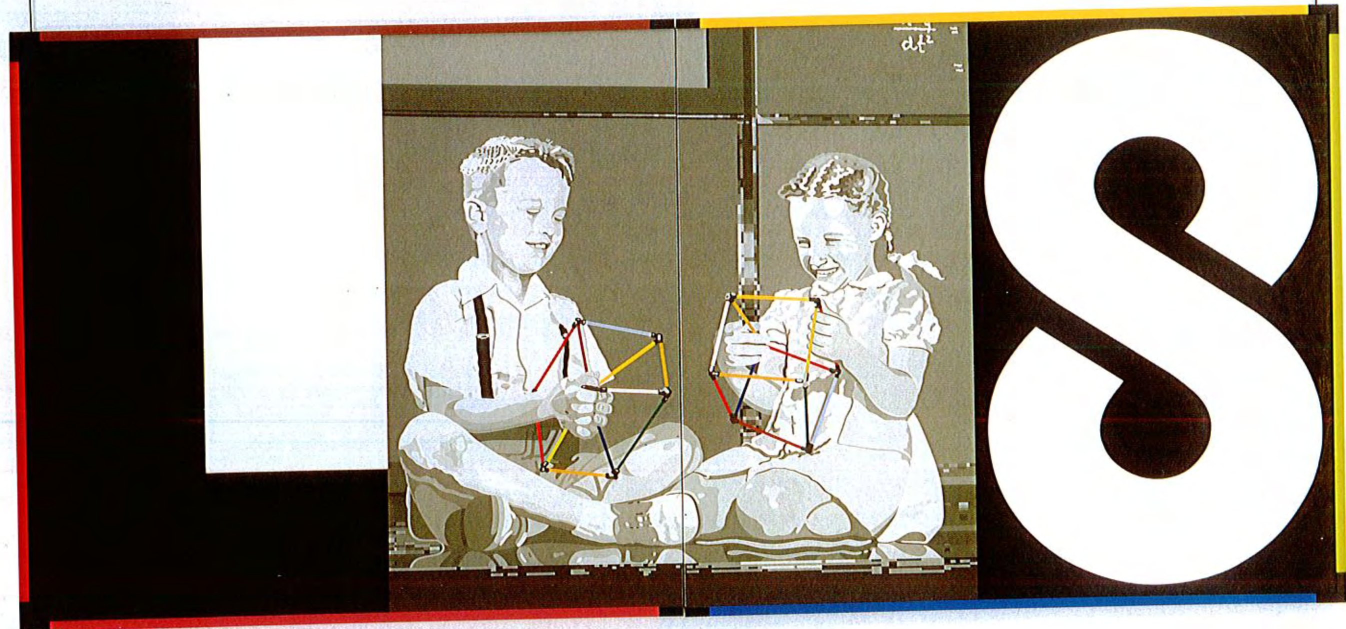


of limits. Peter Tyndall's 1990 installation at Yuill/Crowley Gallery in Sydney included abstract motifs and typographical forms from Russian Revolutionary art as a component in a satirical fantasy on the international art market and its Documentas, and on his experience as a participant in the 1988 Venice Biennale. *¡Relax!,* 1988-90, was typically mordant. His installation knowingly utilised the aesthetic commandments most valued during the 1980s afterglow of avant-garde rhetoric. It was a prayer of postmodernity: to undermine, destabilise and transgress. In most of his works, Tyndall alluded to populist complaints about the Art Cult (of contemporary art) and based his text-dominated paintings around the idea of a "secret society" of culture. He incorporated dreams into his works as a way of obliquely commenting on cultural consumption and power.

¡Relax! comprised several works that mimicked the appearance of paintings. By adopting an eclectic role of cultural anthropologist, employing several styles and media, Tyndall circumvented categorisation. Thus, for over two decades, he deliberately titled all his works *detail: A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/ someone looks at something.* His work for Aperto, the survey exhibition of the 1988 Venice Biennale, was subtitled *The right-angle giver,* 1988; it combined an image of Christ with a carpenter's tool (the spirit level) as a metaphor for cultural purity and control. In *¡Relax!,* a painting with the words "¡Relax! World art is only hegemony art" was wrapped in plastic, leaning inside an opened crate ready for shipping. Alongside hung the silk-screened enlargement of a hand-written notation which described the appearance, on August 8, 1990, of the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, in a scene from the television series *Mission Impossible,* as the Manhattan Museum of Art. The last piece in the show was the most complex: a triptych of text relating a long dream about Tyndall's imaginary inclusion at a Documenta exhibition. During nocturnal explorations through a huge exhibition pavilion, the artist stumbled into a Piranesian metropolis of activity: "As far as the eye could see the night lights flooded a vast scene of endless structure-building. This was the American contingent. These were Americans".[12] In the dream he then revised his planned piece. Tyndall's ambivalence about his own artistic innocence surfaced at the dream's conclusion. The artist's insistence throughout the dream that Australian "honey" (symbolising Tyndall's intentions) was "pure" was finally contradicted.

12 Wall-text by Peter Tyndall for his 1990 exhibition at Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney.

In *¡Relax!* Tyndall completed a decade-long transition from a 1970s textbook concern



4:4

with epistemology into an apparently more political and satirical voice. If his desire to extract cultural leverage from a provincial location seemed bleak, desperation was mirrored in his insistence on identical titles for every work; titles were "the one piece of writing that the gallery system feels obliged to honour". However, his overdetermined dreams about art also suggested cynicism's opposite. Conversational commentary, endless bracketing of self-expression and Glenn Baxter-like humour together constructed the consistent feeling of a world-view grounded in common sense. Tyndall once published a newspaper comic strip, "Culture Corner with Uncle Pete", which was heavily indebted to Marcel Duchamp, whose influence alerted viewers to the understanding that Tyndall's installation was a matter of considerable refinement and distillation. The artist was absolutely determined to persuade us of his ordinariness. His imagination was pulled leftwards and downwards by a fastidious political undertow. Since his intention was clearly not polemic, Peter Tyndall was imaging a personal Temptation; the romanticism of such an enterprise and the attraction of World Art (the art of the metropolitan centre) was subverted by carefully rationed factuality and humour.

Self-consciousness strengthened the tendency of contemporary art towards a display of refinement, evident in Tyndall's extraordinarily accomplished return to painting in a 1994 Melbourne exhibition. Although the differences between Aleks Danko's and Peter Tyndall's installations appeared great, they were linked by their reflexiveness, their extreme self-consciousness and their knowing, ambivalent understanding of the world of international art – the only art, according to those metropolitan centres, that is authentically contemporary.

Susan Norrie: Signs of Cultural Consumption

In the late 1980s many younger artists as dissimilar as Susan Norrie, Janet Burchill and Jon Cattapan stripped their works of overtly regional references. They did not necessarily share any visual language, but were all self-consciously "international" artists, making art about the televisual worlds of consumer pleasure, adapting retail sales methods and

4:5

4:4
Title: *detail*
A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/ someone looks at something ... LOGOS/HAHA
Medium: *A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/ someone looks at something ...* CULTURAL CONSUMPTION PRODUCTION
Date: – 1994–
Artist: Peter Tyndall
Collection: Vizard Foundation (on loan to the University of Melbourne)

4:5 Jon Cattapan, *Rising Tide*, 1989, oil on linen, 195 x 230 cm. Courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; Annandale Galleries, Sydney; and Bellas Gallery, Brisbane.

levelling cultures (high or low, East and West) without apparent comment. Jon Cattapan transformed his paintings from an accomplished regional surrealism into luminous landscapes of global capital. The key to understanding such artists' works was an awareness of the techniques of simulation where, in contrast with the paintings of Tillers and Davila, clear signals of regional dissent were eliminated. To compensate for this erasure, they incorporated the signs of material and cultural consumption.

Since contemporary Australia seemed, at the start of that prosperous time (during a credit boom preceding the stock-market crash of 1988 and the art-market collapse of 1991) to offer a quintessential experience of postmodernism, they were clearly affected by a particular *zeitgeist*, characterised by the artificial, the fake and an ironic, ambivalent reverence for the idea of art.

4:6 Susan Norrie, *fête*, 1986, oil on plywood, 213 x 152.5 cm. Collection: Moët & Chandon, Epernay, France. Photograph: Robert Walker. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.

Susan Norrie painted Walt Disney characters and iconic representations of consumer identity. Her abstract expressionist simulations were substituted for authentic, expressive gestures. Norrie maintained in 1990 that painting "is quite bankrupted now".[13] In her paintings, the universe looked like the realisation of human desires: this was a long way from allowing the existence of any "authentic" experience at all.

fête, 1986, was a painting of picture-postcard references in which signs of the profound and the sublime were quoted, neutralised and reduced. The impact of her pictures resulted from Norrie's intense sense of the contemporary while, paradoxically, her sources were often antique objects from museums. The co-option of museum culture in *fête* embodied many widely shared notions of dislocation; she dramatised this free-floating disequilibrium in her late 1980s paintings to the point of parody. In *fête*, Norrie confiscated museum and popular imagery in a blurry, "mix'n'match" sludge of high art, mass culture and individual production through which she signified the deliberate tragic frivolity of "modern times". *fête* was tinged with malevolence: images of decay were paired with the most sumptuous surfaces. Mickey Mouse was portrayed as an amphetamined, grinning Pierrot in yellow gloves, silk-suited frills and fancy slippers – an image adapted from a painting by French Rococo artist Watteau. Adrift in a miasma of aquatic, slimy, gestural abstraction, the mouse gestured downwards into inky pits of paint. In this murky space floated the signs of high culture: a yellow *tachiste* crown; blotchy, half-glimpsed courtiers strayed from another Watteau painting; the divine sphere of Platonic measurement. The mouse looked sideways at chair-lift cabins appropriated from an amusement park or a World Fair; Norrie mixed references to leisure, television and Disneyland with historical citations (from Watteau) and modernist allusions (the overblown gestural New York School rhetoric of Hans Hofmann). The painting was heavily indebted to Robert Rauschenberg's early canvases, such as *Tracer*, 1964, and both works reflected a mobile, restless idea of personal identity based on scavenging and shopping for old and new images, juxtaposing them amidst messy abstract marks and passages of more precise figuration. *fête* was an image of cultural transaction and its ambiguous shapes were deliberately imprecise; Mickey Mouse was set loose in an endless chain of desire-driven transactions. Norrie observed: "The female situation is often that of a perpetual state of shopping. Also, my father was involved in department stores which is why, I suppose, the notion of retail is important to me."[14]

fête won Norrie the inaugural Moët & Chandon Art Foundation award in 1987. The Moët & Chandon award, which was restricted to artists aged less than 35 years, was one of the richest art prizes in Australia. The inaugural exhibition was dominated by

13 Susan Norrie, quoted in Jennifer Stevenson, "Art Trade", *Vogue Australia*, May 1990, p. 146.

14 Susan Norrie, quoted in "Susan Norrie: French Polish", *Good Weekend*, February 26, 1988, p. 22. Her father was the Deputy Chairman of Grace Brothers Department Stores in Sydney.

polarised conceptions of personal style, ranging from the self-conscious, clinical "deconstructive" scientific diagrams of Jan Nelson, and the overblown, finger-painted neo-expressionism of Jonathan Throsby to the more conservative modernist figure paintings of Joe Furlonger (who won the prize the following year). *fête* correctly established Norrie's public reputation as both a traditional *auteur* (the sensuous paint quality of the picture was much admired by conservative critics) and a supremely Cool postmodern stylist, aware of and ironically distanced from the theatricality of her painting, which would surface again in a later Sydney Artspace installation, *Error of Closure*, 1994, and her large survey at the Art Gallery of New South Wales at the end of 1994.

The Tall Tales & True series, which included *fête*, was a turning-point for Norrie. In earlier paintings, such as the Lavished Living series, which was shown at New York's Guggenheim Museum as part of a 1984 Australian survey exhibition, Norrie reworked traditions of Australian landscape painting, hiding von Guerard-like pastoral scenes behind anthropomorphic rocks. Norrie observed:

> I choose objects out of the landscape, certain rocks and land formations, and use them as metaphors, juxtaposing them with the woman – whom I've deliberately clad in 18th century garments, a reference to being out of time, to the sense of our being pioneers.[15]

15 Susan Norrie, quoted in "The Artist Exposed", *Vogue Living*, October 1984, p. 82.

From these works onwards, her self-consciously regional metaphors mutated into images of metropolitan origin. Her early interest in Australian national symbols, which was similar in inflection to Imants Tillers' ironic adoration of museums, was displaced by a deliberately cosmopolitan vocabulary of forms. Norrie's *The Sublime and the Ridiculous*, 1985, was an encyclopedic compendium of visual clichés from Old Master painting in museums and from B-grade horror movies. Everything was either flawed or a metamorphosed version of something else. The picture's techniques, which included *tachiste* mark-making, feathery brushstrokes and dark, enamelled glazes, were appropriated from the history of pre-modern painting and then cursorily reproduced so that signs of painterly originality were exploited as deliberate, luscious ugliness.

The Sublime and the Ridiculous existed in two versions; one was a smaller copy of the other in an inversion of the usual romantic image of spontaneous inspiration. A precipitous vertiginous viewpoint reinforced the sense of inaccessibility, just as Norrie's juxtaposition of cheap *grand guignol* with great art suggested that a spontaneous relationship to beauty was a thing of the past. The equivalence of images from high art with the signs of mass culture was, she implied, the fate of masterpieces in an age of mechanical reproduction. In *The Sublime and the Ridiculous*, kitsch and fantasy were treated with an art-critical seriousness so that the traditional notion of the artist as an authentic, original *auteur* was replaced with a manipulative identity borrowed from popular culture – Walt Disney's idea of the cartoon animator as an "imagineer".[16] Norrie observed that American imperialism, cultural colonialism and the history of its impact on Australian art informed the Tall Tales & True series. Her paintings of this period included Disney figures such as Goofy and Mickey Mouse set amongst abstract expressionist blocks of colour and expressionist drips. They were infected by a ghoulish fascination with decay, kitsch and *fin-de-siècle* ambivalence.

16 See Jo Holder, "Conditional Tales and Truths", in *Susan Norrie*, University Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 1986, p. 6.

Norrie highlighted the gendered implications of abstract signs in a feminist examination of modernism. Her attitude to subject matter both excited and troubled Melbourne *Age* critic Gary Catalano: "Norrie's paintings all betray a preoccupation with sentimentality

and kitsch. The ambivalent attractions of standardised or second-hand emotions is the governing theme of Norrie's art".[17] She had embraced Pop Art's imagery of mass culture, production and consumption with the most inappropriate, anachronistic techniques of easel painting. Her ability to create seductive, *trompe l'oeil* effects of considerable beauty was disorienting because the effects existed only for intellectual purposes. The originals that she copied seemed not to hold any interest for her and traditional ideas of originality found only the most fugitive place. The canons of Academic copying had privileged certain originals as special signs of heritage and tradition; while she still cited these canons, she patently doubted their validity. Copying Old Masters had, until the 19th century, asserted a sense of continuity and allegiances with earlier artists. However, in her works, copying was the sign of her own and her viewers' alienation from cultural models. The cathedral in *The Sublime and the Ridiculous* was detached from its inherent value as a sign of culture and belief. Continuity with the past had been eliminated, despite all the painterly scumbles and glazes. Whilst 1980s photography took the depletion of art's aura as its starting-point, Norrie's appropriations always referred to the accumulation of value, whether monetary or cultural.[18] Her borrowings were agonisingly suspended between the critical and the collusive.

Suspension and incorporation became obvious devices in Norrie's next two series. The PÉRIPHERIQUE paintings, such as *Debit*, 1988, and *Credit*, 1988, featured words rendered in elegant cursive script. The iconic vocabulary of economics appeared emblazoned, multiplied, inverted, fragmented and camouflaged in lurid pinks and reds. Their "all-overness" implied infinite extension and the repeated applications of script were virtually illegible. The thinly stencilled text was suspended and embossed in glossy layers of liquid brushstrokes, repeated decorative flourishes and rich surfaces, which deliberately signified nothing except surface effect and foregrounded painterliness as a commercially marketable, mechanical process. As in her earlier pictures, painterly virtuosity produced deliberate confections; the viewer was left unable to feel any real empathy other than admiration at the spectacle of a collapse of meaning and ascendancy of the market. The repeated cursive flourishes were expressive of "style" rather than content, as were the elegantly messy brush marks of the Tall Tales & True series.

Norrie's "abstraction" represented a considered historical passivity; her simulation of non-objective painting reflected an interest in the persistent authority of modernist mythologies. She adapted and analysed avant-garde strategies that had become clichés, such as the idea of "subversive" art, by emptying the significations of texts and images from her pictures. Norrie's paintings illustrated, quite deliberately, the complicity between high art, mass culture and the art market.

What was gained by this so-called recognition of complicity, and why was modernist art, particularly its most emblematic genre – abstraction – so victimised by artists such as Norrie? According to French postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard, "the various avant-gardes have, so to speak, humbled and disqualified reality by examining the pictorial techniques which are so many devices to make us believe in it".[19] Norrie, like Juan Davila and Peter Tyndall, was suspicious of both the reductive modern presentation of the unpresentable and the deliberately constrained artistic vocabulary that had come to represent little more than a mystification of artistic means posing as universal truth. Susan Norrie's progression mimicked the teleological reduction of formal means and vocabulary; she eliminated the signs of figuration during a decade of her work. Her

17 Gary Catalano, "A display of perplexity", *The Age*, October 22, 1986, p. 14.

18 Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage In Contemporary Art", *Artforum* v.21 n.1, September 1982, pp. 43-56. Walter Benjamin's seminal text, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", expands on this idea.
This depletion, Buchloh explains, occurs when appropriation effects a separation of the signified from its signifier, rather than enhancing a distant original. A visual text is superimposed with or doubled by a second text. The reading is shifted to an examination of the object's framing device, which determines its pictorial sign.

19 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 78-79.

4:7 Susan Norrie, *The Sublime and the Ridiculous*, 1985, oil on plywood, 240 x 180 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Photograph: Kalev Maevali. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.

4:7

4:8

4:8 Susan Norrie, *Model Two* (detail from the *Error of Closure* installation), 1994, oil on canvas, linen-covered frame, wooden object on veneered stand. Collection: the artist. Photograph: Peter Smart. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.

images, though, were neither entirely emptied of meaning nor as banal as critics asserted. The mass production suggested in *Debit* was belied by the end result. Off-register, blurred, unevenly painted and arbitrarily coloured, like postmodern wallpaper, her pictures were more atmospheric than a deadpan posture required. The PÉRIPHERIQUE paintings implied the confinement of knowledge and artistic resources within the prison of received images.

In *Ensemble*, 1990, three large, wood-veneer cabinets housed small paintings. Cabinet-making became her carefully over-literal representation of a concept: veneer cabinets enclosed smaller pictures like works within works, establishing the viewers' position at a distant remove like a window-shopper. Such display techniques also subsumed one aesthetic object inside another, as in an installation. Her allusion to retail display highlighted her affinity with postmodern American artists such as Richard Artschwager and Sherrie Levine, and with early conceptual art by Donald Judd. Like these artists, she alluded to the picture-frame's aesthetic function as the demarcation zone for art. She placed herself within the tradition of conceptual art initiated by Marcel Duchamp.

Norrie's career moved rapidly into the institutions of fame and fashion: from the much-deserved Moët & Chandon prize to New York exhibitions. Her work described the decadent economy of images analysed by Jean Baudrillard and thus her paintings' hypermannerism was clearly legible in the hyper-reality of New York. She saw the viewer as consumer, and therefore affirmed and exploited painting's place as an eminently desirable commodity. Susan Norrie's paintings embalmed sickly glamour and the

evaporation of profundity, as if she wished to force upon her viewers a reflection of their own profound narcissism.

Mistaking Culture for its Signs: The Achievement of Postmodern Art

During the 1980s, postmodern artists, critics and journals occupied positions of authority and prestige in Australian cultural institutions, exercising a benevolent cultural hegemony. The editorial bias of Australian art magazines, including *Art & Text*, *Tension*, *Agenda*, *Eyeline* and even, on occasions, the relatively long-established *Art and Australia*, reflected a commitment to the sympathetic coverage of experimental and postmodern art. The programs of contemporary art spaces like the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane and Artspace in Sydney privileged similar forms. On the other hand, alternative artist-run spaces as different as Roar Studios, in the early 1980s, and Store 5, later in the decade, had adopted the rhetoric of an oppositional modernist revival, hostile to institutions and ostensibly wary of recuperation into the mainstream. These were superficial differences, incorporated with relative ease into institutions and commercial galleries during the boom of the late 1980s, when contemporary art, for once, was both fashionable and profitable. There was a boom in sales of art and, like the general 1980s return to painting, this reflected conservative times. Dealers and curators demonstrated a keen interest in the promotion of new artists, who received extensive attention in commercial galleries and in survey exhibitions such as Perspectas and Biennales. There was an expansion in the enthusiasm and the composition of contemporary art's audience. A plethora of newspaper articles about the boom, art investment, lifestyle enhancement opportunities in art, and gossip about artists' shifting allegiances from gallery to gallery attended the boom from 1986 until 1990. Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art was able to attract private sponsorship from the Smorgon family to build a spacious new wing, opening with a large exhibition of Imants Tillers' paintings at the start of 1987. By 1990 there had been a considerable redefinition of the characters – artists, dealers, curators, the art press and audiences – in contemporary art's narrative.

Museums, magazines and galleries were the most important spaces in which art was seen and in which artistic success was brokered. Unlike the Dada artists of World War I Europe, who measured their success by their exclusion from museums, Australian avant-gardists did not bite the hands that fed them.

Charisma and glamour had become for younger artists in the 1980s both a spiritual aspiration (in the case of American artist Jeff Koons) and a way of mediating reality. According to founding editor of *Art & Text*, Paul Taylor, writing in an *Art in America* special issue on money, it was the artists, by and large, who talked about their bank balances and tax.[20]

20 Paul Taylor, interview in Nancy Princenthal and Deborah Drier, "Critics and the Marketplace", *Art in America* v.76 n.7, July 1988, pp.108-109.

The work of Australian postmodern artists in the 1980s was marked by an awareness, discussed in the last chapter, of their peripheral location in regard to the centres of world art. This consciousness was developed further in the late 1980s and early 1990s by artists such as Susan Norrie, who blurred the division between art and history, mimicking and recapitulating, by their stylishness, the end of modern art in a postmodern period.

Danko and Norrie, however, were characterised by a fitful desire located around the most persistent wish of the avant-garde – an ambition to see the end of the institution of art. Their paintings and installations, like postmodern (and, often, modernist) art gener-

ally, were predatory (the artists' preyed upon other artists' works by exploiting copying traditions), oedipal (the meanings that they perverted were central to the art they grew up with), ironic (their pictures perverted previously simple meanings), and alienated (endless resuscitations of style proved that every good idea had clearly already been had).

Susan Norrie, Aleks Danko and Peter Tyndall created works intentionally lacking in emotional depth. They deliberately mistook modernism for its signs, in order to make the "purely plastic" language of modernism available for interrogation. The regional and historical references of Australian postmodern artists were combined with recycled modernist strategies, including the enervated avant-garde desire to "subvert", but in a much more complex, ironic and layered way than the new abstractionists of an earlier chapter. During the consumer boom that would end disastrously in the recession of the early 1990s, postmodern art communicated the absolute desirability of the commodity fetish through the manipulation of media spectacle and the reception of art. Art in the 1980s, as these artists understood, was intensely theatrical and its stage was usually the gallery or art museum. Abandoning the idea of an eternal, archetypal museum without walls, this postmodernism was also confronted by the loss of the elusive promise, sought by socially committed artists of earlier decades, of a place for art outside the museum.