Conclusion: Treachery and Fiction

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The Thief in the Attic: Renegotiating Contemporary Art

The 1990s represent a moment between shifting artistic paradigms – a window through which the recent past's postmodern insistence on artificiality and fragmentation intersects with the detachment of memory from objects and thus, inevitably, the intervention of treachery and fiction. If artistic identity was revealed, in the postmodern art examined in this book, as a construction in the library of late-20th century intertextuality, then fiction is the terminus through which the resulting images depart towards the end of the millennium. Images circulate in an underground network of meaning and its necessary opposite, betrayal; certain older artists – Imants Tillers, Robert Owen and Robert Rooney – have been prescient in their understanding of this mutability just as Aleks Danko's or Domenico de Clario's installations remain exemplary illustrations of its preference for darkness.[1]

Three predicaments draw the works described in this book together: the metropolitan centre's failure to take care of its children (settler societies such as Australia or Canada); the failure of nationality as a viable construction (a cultural cure-all for our politically and economically dependent condition); the decadence and bad faith of the avant-garde as it survives in Australia (or, for that matter, in the metropolitan centres of Europe and North America, and in its obliviousness to anything other than the forms of a crisis of representation at the large centres of culture in Europe and the United States).

A gradual but complete renegotiation is, therefore, under way. For example, many of the artists in the later chapters of this book represent a generation of artists who question art's capacity to operate as a vanguard movement. They have come to doubt the idea that art has the capacity to "subvert" society. Some, such as Susan Norrie, reveal the complicity of art in the politics of commodification and spectacle. Paradoxically, others – the new abstractionists described in Chapter 2 – seek to reclaim the rhetoric of "resistant art", as if non-objective abstract shapes on canvas or wood could challenge the overwhelming power of material culture. Finally, just as certain theorists argue for the appropriation of both modernity and postmodernity by the periphery, artists such as Juan Davila are involved in a perverse colonisation of the mainstream.

The Library: 1990s Perspectives on Artistic Identity

The deepening shadows of postmodernity have forever blurred our picture of the artist. Because its revelations of fragmentation and intertextuality are by now a reflex, a work of art is often visualised as a library and the artist as a community of authors. If artistic meaning is seen as a construction, then it is also able to be a fiction; invented worlds in art are a way of deciphering hybridisation. Libraries and catalogues abound as images in contemporary art and are often the result of collaborations between artists – from the West Australian-based Glick Foundation's mysterious exhibition programs to Pat Brassington's 1993 collaboration, *incorporeal 2: "book of jonah, 1932, sinking into a world whose bars would hold me fast forever"*, 1993. The *incorporeals* were a series of installations and Happenings, in which Tasmanian critic Edward Colless and photographer David McDowell co-operated with other artists to create works that would have been unrealisable by the collaborating artist alone.

Postmodernity has irrevocably altered the shape of our awareness of international

1 The male gender of these artists is no accident; just as it would have been easy to assemble another list composed of women artists of the following generation whose works illustrate this theme, so the absence of women here makes a point about familiar inequalities in artistic practice and opportunity during the late 1960s and 1970s. Lyndal Jones' or Vivienne Binns' works, for example, did not specifically explore the issues of failure and treachery.

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7:1 Kevin Henderson, with Edward Colless & David McDowell, *incorporeal 3: "The Insect Cage. Correct Sadist. Between the wish and the thing lies the world"*, 1993, performance/scenography, Hobart. Photograph: David McDowell.

7:2 Pat Brassington, with Edward Colless & David McDowell, *incorporeal 2: "book of jonah, 1932, sinking into a world whose bars would hold me fast forever"*, 1993, installation/scenography, Hobart. Photograph: David McDowell.

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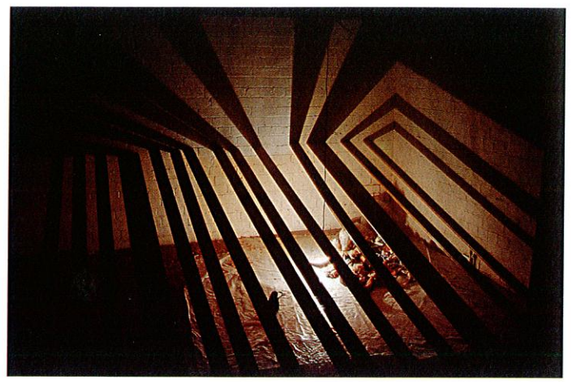

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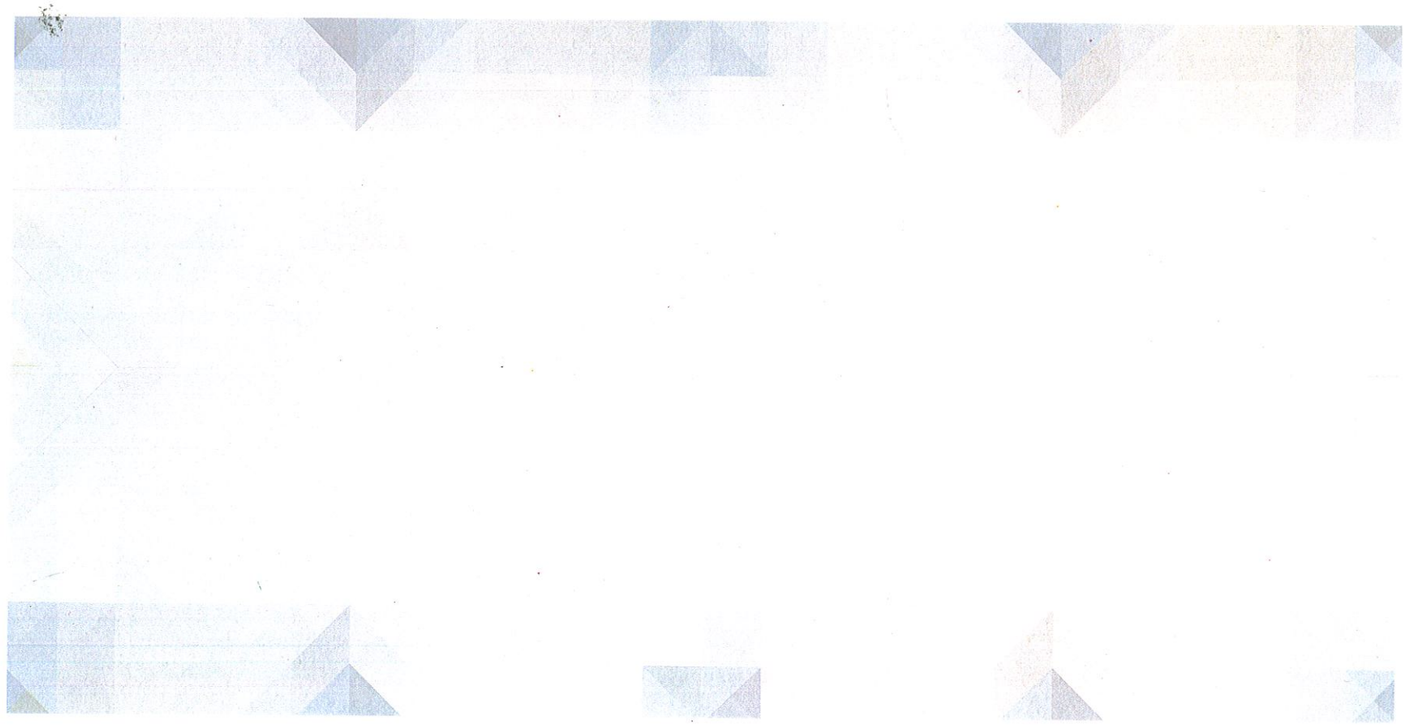
culture; Australian artists appear within the world of international contemporary art as postcolonial participants, and absorb the implications and bankruptcies of imperial representation. Neo-modernist abstractionists (including the Melbourne Store 5 group and Sydney artists who originally showed at First Draft West) mixed and cited styles; they have created hybrid postcolonial forms almost in spite of themselves and thus their work resembled that of historically alert postmodern artists like Susan Norrie and A. D. S. Donaldson, whose dry, ironic installations were a *bricolage*-like instant recreation of mainstream, modernist art.

Imants Tillers' 1980s paintings prefigured such artists' concerns. Taking the history of art as both subject and language; his pictures described the gap between the periphery and the centre. He emerges, therefore, as an extraordinarily prophetic artist. Tillers' paintings became a widely accepted Australian referent for postmodern art, but also demonstrated that it is no longer possible to reduce relations of dependency between centre and periphery to a linear equation. The original/copy relationships of modernism, where the metropolitan centre of world culture (New York or Paris) was the source of new ideas that were gradually disseminated to the periphery, is no longer meaningful.

Tillers' paintings await thorough reassessment; so do the early 1970s works of Dale Hickey, Robert Hunter and Robert Rooney. Such reassessment is crucial because the revival of abstraction, that began in the later 1980s as an attempt to redefine discursive relevance and conventionalised styles, fragmented under the weight of its own contradictions. The new abstract painters treated abstract painting as a period style available for revival and therefore demonstrated clear affinities with the work of these earlier artists. The parodic abstraction of Hunter's, Hickey's and Rooney's pictures already existed in an ambivalent relationship to late-modernist painting, representing a conscious betrayal of international formalist abstraction. Hunter's 1990s paintings, such as *Untitled #4*, 1990, were major achievements in their luminous antipathy towards conventionally understood minimalism.

The links of Australian artists to modernism are complicated: neo-modernist artists (such as Constanze Zikos) and late-modernist artists (for example Robert Rooney) both produced work that explored signifying practices at the borderline between figuration and non-figuration, or design and fine art. Profound, unacknowledged connections exist in terms of the betrayal by painters of their models. Copying is often held to have



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7:3 Robert Hunter, *Untitled #4*, 1990, acrylic on plywood, 122 x 244 cm. Photograph: John Riddy. Courtesy Pinacotheca, Melbourne.

7:4-6 Robert Owen, *Phase Zone Three (Into the Light)*, 1987, installation, Victorian College of the Arts Gallery, Melbourne. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

been reinvented through postmodern appropriation as a new, culturally critical practice, resulting in the rethinking of representation. Modernist art was supposed to be a window opening inward to imaginary worlds; recent art instead, according to many critics, opens away from truth onto a series of even more abstracted models.

Much of the contemporary art in this book looks genuine but refuses to function as painting or sculpture, eschewing self-expression or even artistic status. Many artists are now suspicious of art that poses as critique. Their work, distinguished from the earlier avant-garde by its lack of overt *cultural* criticism, operates instead through infiltration. These artists – "grunge" artists, installation artists, photographers and Aboriginal painters (urban and tribal) – implement the strategy articulated by critic Thomas Lawson nearly a decade ago; they deliberately combine representation with misrepresentation.[2]

The Terminus: Messages for the Centre

As it departs from the periphery, art presents itself as a mirror. The mirror needs to appear as clear as possible if the important global metropolitan centres such as New York are to contemplate themselves. Mimicry is the means by which, according to writers as diverse as Homi Bhabha and Trinh T. Minh-ha, the periphery's awareness of formlessness is communicated to the centre. From this perspective, Australian contemporary art emerges like an image in a painting by Chilean artist Arturo Duclos that was shown at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in 1993: a coffin in a museum, containing a picture by Mondrian inside its wooden walls.

Domenico de Clario's underworlds describe the end of a paradigm that can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp; they forego the supposedly exemplary but now enervated museum experience of aesthetic nomination. Grunge artists (for example, Hany Armanious) illustrate the same elision. Edward Colless described one type of installation as scenography, differentiating its filmic dimension, in which the setting itself is foregrounded, from conventional post-object art's invocation of the aesthetic frame and demarcation of art's edges, even within an expanded field. Colless and McDowell's *incorporeal* collaborations share many similarities with de Clario's three-part Melbourne installation, *Components of an Expression Machine*, emphasising their audiences' participation within Antonin Artaud's concept of an "activated metaphysics".

For artists at the periphery – in Australia as well as Chile – this adaptation or mimicry often results in a twisted version of minimalism – a minimalism with content. On the one hand, Trinh T. Minh-ha argues for a breakdown of cultural separatism, ironically warning white artists of the probability of failure and misunderstanding: "It is better to mind your own business".[3] On the other, the presentation of two themes – silence and treachery – is an accurate description of an immensely complicated dematerialisation of meaning and the politics of representation. From the 1970s onwards, Robert Owen's installations crossed disciplinary and cultural borders; their primary metaphor was silence, and they were constructed within a consciously disingenuous employment of minimalism's international syntax to create visual paradoxes. In Owen's 1987 *Phase Zone Three (into the light)*, abstract painting was returned to its synaesthesic and scientific sources. Deciphering *Phase Zone Three*'s components was of considerable consequence because the experience of the work was far from classic minimalism, which emphasised a phenomenological resensitisation of perceptions. Instead, Owen assembled a library of information, incorporating an absent collaborative community of twelve powerful

2 Essays by many writers, including Eric Michaels, Imants Tillers and John Welchman have explored the deferral and editing of meaning and the reception of contemporary Aboriginal art. See Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting", in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art after Modernism* pp. 153-165. Both Thomas Lawson, the Scottish-born but American-based artist, art magazine editor and critic, and American curator William Olander have written about the role of the spy, the infiltrator, the collaborator and the fake in contemporary art – in short, about treachery.

3 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "A Musical Accuracy: The Politics of Identity and Difference", public lecture, Melbourne, August 18, 1993, author's notes.

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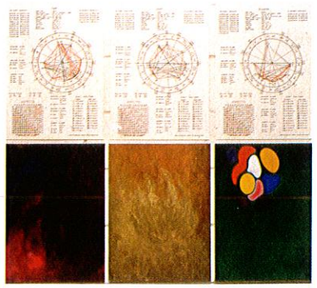

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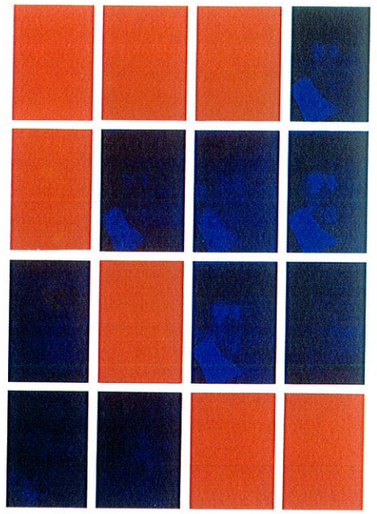

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7:7 Lindy Lee, *The Ulterior Function*, 1993, photocopy and acrylic on Stonehenge paper, 16 panels, 175 x 125 cm. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Michael Wardell Gallery, Melbourne.

7:8 Lindy Lee, *Erase*, 1993, photocopy and acrylic on Stonehenge paper, 30 panels, 182.5 x 168 cm. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Michael Wardell Gallery, Melbourne.

female authors and artists who were, as willing collaborators, denying the potential for betrayal in works of uncertain gender.

German neo-expressionist painter Anselm Kiefer's status as the contemporary celebrant of loss within the European cultural tradition is well known. Kiefer is contemporary art's unreconstructed image of the charismatic male "genius"; his enormous paintings are hung as centrepieces in Australia's major collections. He is also the most obvious type of "thief in the attic" – the mainstream artist appropriating peripheral culture. Reactions to his sophisticated thefts, however, underestimate the artist's interest in heterogeneity and expose the unreflective demands for homogenous "enlightenment" at the periphery. Inevitably, an aura of scandal surrounded the artist's visit to Australia to deliver an address at the 1992 Adelaide Festival. Adelaide, for Kiefer, represented the border between metropolitan culture and the still authentic, mystical culture of Aboriginal Australia. Greeted with media attention usually accorded important film stars, he was described in newspaper reports as the world's most renowned living artist. His speech, on March 11, 1992, was awaited with the expectancy due an art-world Delphic oracle, but also as the expression of Eurocentric self-absorption. To the surprise and evident disappointment of his Australian audience, instead of speaking about his paintings Kiefer chose to recite a long poem that he had written as a meditation on a narrative from Aboriginal mythology, gleaned from a reading of Bruce Chatwin's eclectic novel *Songlines*.[4]

What Kiefer saw, of course, in Australia was his own subjectivity. Similarly, the New York feminist collective, Guerrilla Girls, also in Adelaide for the Festival, found the sexism and domination of a Manhattan or Cologne art machine duplicated at the Antipodes. During question time, the Guerrilla Girls demanded that Kiefer donate a percentage of his income to "women and artists of colour", unhesitatingly importing an American discourse and terminology that translated imperfectly to an Australian cultural context except as the reflection of their own imperial subjectivities, educating the unsophisticated locals whose culture had absorbed many more lessons about marginality than the Guerilla Girls realised. Much of Kiefer's hostile white-Australian audience constructed an equally problematic, protective relationship – in their case to Aboriginal mythology, even though their Australia exists as the destroyer of much of that culture. The confused, censorious and hostile reaction to both Kiefer and the bizarre mythic imagery customarily found in mysticism and mythology (where sexual metaphors are used to describe esoteric propositions) was eerily reminiscent of the medieval Iconoclastic controversies that Kiefer drew on for his paintings of the early 1980s.

South African journalist Rian Malan's controversial book, *My Traitor's Heart*, describes the scarifying effects of colonisation and the tragedy of apartheid through the white South African population's refusal to act with any kind of good faith.[5] Adrift from empire and living in another land corralled from its indigenous inhabitants, Malan's "Just White Men" are just as easily seen as the cultivated, sophisticated Australian audience of artists, intellectuals and thinking people from all immigrant backgrounds – since, as Anne-Marie Willis has pointed out, a common materialist ethos applies to all non-Aboriginal Australians.[6] These Just Whites, unable to come to terms with their historical situation, were Kiefer's Australian audience.

The intolerant materialism of late-capitalist society appears to be simply inadequate to deal with dispossession, which requires an apparent act of altruism that would in

4 According to Chatwin, the Lizard Man travels across Central Australia, singing the world into existence; the stanzas of his story are preserved as inscriptions upon the landscape, recognised by us as rivers, rocks and mountains. Kiefer compared this with other epic journeys, like that of Ulysses, as a voyage of self-discovery. Incipient truth is recognized through revelation: this, rather than dialectical learning and discussion, is the effective arena of art. Paralleling Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay's distance from the modernist aesthetic, Kiefer disregarded the importance of present-day culture; in his view, art has been in a state of decline since the Fall of Byzantium. He identified European mysticism with the Dreaming, and epigraphy with Aboriginal representation of songlines through visual and spoken codes. The Lizard Man's journey implies travel, a destination and a split between the cultural, spiritual and social bodies that is not perhaps present as a teleological movement in Aboriginal paintings' narrative structures. In Adelaide, Kiefer emphasised the mobility of meaning and the relativity of artistic intentions: "For the way between the intention and the artwork which appears when the process comes to its

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temporary end. The result is always different from the intention - the boomerang comes back, but in a different mode. And, secondly, the movement of the boomerang is a metaphor for the changes a work of art undergoes on its way to the spectator." [Anselm Kiefer, quoted by Michael Shmith, "Different Strokes", *The Age*, March 12, 1992, p. 11.] Kiefer is easily criticised as the paradigmatic male artist. His work is conservative because of its point-of-view: hermetic European phallocentrism is judged to be outmoded and reprehensible. Kiefer obviously is a privileged male European; his art has been based on participation and debate within that tradition. However, the Adelaide criticisms of Kiefer, though well-intentioned, reflected a woolly misunderstanding of critical terms such as phallocentrism and deconstruction, confusing methods of reading texts with political strategies. Postcolonial feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak clarified the inescapability of such identifications: "The subject is – the subject must – identify itself with its self-perceived intention. The fact that it must do so is not a description of what it is. That is the difference between decentered and centered. There is no way that a subject can be anything but centered … There is no such thing as the decentered subject". (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, p.146.)

5 Rian Malan, *My Traitor's Heart (Blood and Bad Dreams: A South African Explores the Madness in His Country, His Tribe and Himself)*, Vintage, London, 1990.

6 See the concluding chapter of Anne-Marie Willis's incisive book about cultural identity, *Illusions of Identity*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1993.

7 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "A Matter of Timing", author's notes.

8 Narelle Jubelin, quoted in Jennifer Stevenson, "Art Trade", *Vogue Australia*, May 1990, p. 146.

Facing page: Joan Grounds, *Bridge* (detail), 1990, installation, 200 Gertrude Street Artists Space, mixed media. Photograph: Terence Bogue. Courtesy Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

reality permit the colonisers' cultural survival. Two centuries of oppression and conquest have produced European settler populations, in Malan's words, "spiritually deformed" and unable through greed and pride to do anything constructive to repair the damage. Peripheral cultures such as Australia and Canada recycle the terminal forms of avant-garde subversion received from New York and Cologne as a means of simultaneously overcompensating for a peripheral status and knowingly reinscribing their marginality – a desire to both reproduce the centre and flaunt difference.

Melancholic longing to be up there with the big players of the international art world is a pathological condition, enabling a denial of the ambivalences in Australian cultural relationships with European and American centres. Amongst contemporary artists and critics, a surplus of rectitude (of what has come to be known as political correctness) customarily overpowers acknowledgment of the illegitimacy on which local histories are founded. The productivity of working rigorously through this inauthenticity is illustrated in the works of Rooney and Owen.

At the 1993 Sydney Biennale symposium, Trinh T. Minh-ha asserted that difference is a source of interaction, not friction.[7] Very few white Australians are able to deal constructively with their "hyphenated" identities – as cultural inhabitants of several worlds. Some artists have already acknowledged their hyphenated identity, either working, like Tim Johnson, on approximately the terms of the original inhabitants, or resurrecting meaning, like Sydney painter Lindy Lee – in the Asian/Australian artist's outrageously poignant, multi-panelled, manipulated photocopies of ghostly Old Master paintings. She consciously delineates experiences that foreshadow an elaborate world in which it is necessary to say or be two or three things at once, even dispensing with the ubiquitous postmodern cloak of irony, as in *Erase*, 1993. These artists move outside the boundaries of nationality, fixed authorship and a mainstream; they work with the hybridisation of an Antipodean creole culture.

Of the major questions to be asked during the 1990s, the most critical concern the manner in which postcolonial and diasporic cultures such as Australia can interact with other world centres of culture and information. What can the centre trade with them; what can they offer the centre? The attraction between centre and periphery has always been mutual, and the centre's hegemony has often been benevolent. Cultures at the periphery have frequently been willing subjects. Almost all the Australian art examined in this book requires an acknowledgment of hybridisation – the mixing of terms and meanings – to a greater or lesser extent. The treacherous relation to an apparently essential self is probably inevitable and is seen, finally, in the experience of many Australian artists. As Narelle Jubelin observed, "Of course it is a dicey trade swapping, mixing, integrating cultures, which is why I've included myself in the self-portraits. I'm involved in the whole deal".[8] The two metaphors of a library and the terminus refer to Australian artists' inevitable boundary-crossings. These boundaries are more than inflexible formations of class, gender, nationality and race. The evidence of contemporary Australian art has been that the idea of the body as the edge of the personal self is being refigured at the end of the world.