CHARLES GREEN Peripheral Vision Contemporary Australian Art 1970–1994

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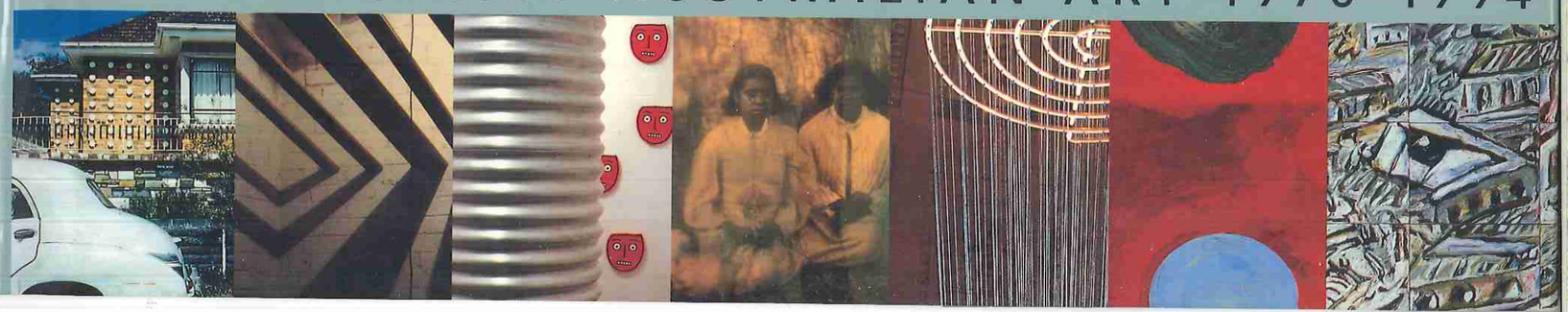
BY CHARLES GREEN

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ART 1970–1994



A WORLD ART BOOK BY **CHARLES GREEN**

CRAFTSMAN
HOUSE

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ART 1970–1994

Contents

Acknowledgements

In early 1990, passing through New York, I met Paul Taylor, the founder of *Art & Text*, for the first time. By the end of the evening I had been convinced that the project I outlined to Paul – this book – could be realised, and I am indebted to him for his example of a generous participant in the world of contemporary art. From 1990 onwards, all my art criticism was written with the intention of completing a book on recent Australian art. Then, in 1992, the Visual Art/Crafts Board of the Australia Council awarded me a one-year Fellowship to write *Peripheral Vision: Contemporary Australian Art 1970-1994*. I am deeply grateful for the interest that the Australia Council demonstrated in my work. The Council has been a powerful and unstinting patron of Australian art and art criticism. In addition, the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne provided me with a base and, from 1994, with timely support. The Ian Potter Foundation generously awarded me a grant to assist with the considerable costs of obtaining illustrations.

Various parts of this book were originally published as catalogue essays or in art magazines; although extensively rewritten for this book, I am grateful for these opportunities to develop the following passages in print. Chapter 1 draws on material first published in *Off the Wall/In the Air: A Seventies Selection*, Monash University Gallery and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 1991; *Aleks Danko: Zen Made in Australia*, University of Melbourne Gallery, May 1994; "Mike Parr", *Artforum*, February 1990; "Lost and Found: The Empire of Death", *Binocular: Focusing/Time/Lapses*, 2, October 1992; "Lyndal Jones", *Artforum*, January 1993. Sections of Chapter 2 originally appeared in "Rewriting the Seventies", *Art Monthly*, July 1989; "How painting recaptured Melbourne", *Art Monthly*, December 1989; "Davida Allen", *Artforum*, April 1990; "Janenne Eaton", *Artforum*, February 1991; "Debra Dawes", *Artforum*, October 1991; "Abstract?" (with Stephen Wickham), *West*, Summer 1991; "Robert Rooney", *Art & Text*, January 1994. Chapter 4 draws on "Peter Tyndall", *Artforum*, April 1991. Chapter 5 contains material originally published as "The Dark Wood: Domenico de Clario", *World Art*, November 1993; "Working on Water: Jennifer Turpin", *World Art*, March 1994. Chapter 6 draws on "Western Desert Paintings and Contemporary Culture", catalogue essay, *Aboriginal Paintings from the Desert*, Moscow Union of Artists, Moscow, 1991; "Pansy Napangati", *Artforum*, October 1989; "Juan Davila", *Artforum*, May 1990; "Unofficial World", *Art & Text*, September 1992; "Sydney Biennale", *Artforum*, April 1993; "Tim Johnson", *Art & Text*, September 1993. Chapter 7 is based on "Fiction and Treachery: Contemporary Australian Art", *Australian Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, October 1993.

The complicated task of assembling the illustrations for this book was made almost bearable by the great generosity and common sense, with a few surprising and deeply frustrating exceptions, of many artists. For the most part, I have credited photographers but where there are omissions in credits and permissions I unreservedly apologise. Every attempt has been made to obtain agreements to reproduce images. John Simkin worked on the index.

I am also grateful to *World Art*'s Melbourne office, and especially Terence Hogan, the book's designer, and my editor, Stephanie Holt, for her detailed and perceptive work on the manuscript. Douglas and Helen Green also offered careful advice and editing. Allusions to theories of the copy recur through the book; here, I borrowed extensively from Lyndell Brown's review of these theories in her unpublished 1992 Master of Arts (Visual Art) thesis for the Victorian College of the Arts, "Falsifying History". Most of all, I wish to clearly acknowledge her continual, untiring editing, revisions and suggestions through all the versions of this book.

Prologue

A gulf separates the world of Brett Whiteley's *Self Portrait in the Studio*, 1976, from contemporary Australian art. Though Whiteley painted until his early and lonely death in a motel room on the coast south of Sydney in 1992, few would regard him as a contemporary artist, nor would they regard the experience offered by the picture as contemporary despite Whiteley's prescient and redeeming awareness, in his vast polyptych, *Alchemy*, 1972-73, of Australia's location in Asia.[1] Whiteley presents a vision of plenitude awash in a pathos that has not recognised itself. His delectable blue studio swims in a space in which all objects are positioned on the same visual register: a million-dollar view of Sydney Harbour from the North Shore is neither further nor closer than the equally sinuous body of a nude woman. His self-consciously democratic equivalence of sensation is a pretext for the instant availability of each object; by conflating body with harbour, Whiteley hoped desperately to achieve an already anachronistic identification with two traditional subjects of conservative art – "woman" and "landscape" – in a rush of psychedelic symbiosis. The objects are available, because they are presented only as objects – not self-sufficient subjects with individual personalities. Such an abstract relationship to his models is fitting, because his painting, for all its defects, aptly describes both a lifestyle (based on sensation and dependent on availability) and a vision. The vision is essentially the same as that of Henri Matisse's famous *Red Studio*, 1911, a work to which many of Whiteley's paintings are heavily indebted. Matisse's famous painting is a view onto an art of mental and formal balance.[2] If the French artist's interior is a vision of plenitude and equivalences deriving from a rigorous examination of *politesse*, pleasure and the weight of colour, then Whiteley's plenitude is always excessive and demanding of a conspicuous consumption (of excessive visual, erotic and extra-pictorial stimulus) in order for belief to be maintained in spite of the strains that threaten to appear. Whiteley's equivalences are hyped up, strident and aggressive. Although his formal decisions, such as the Modigliani-like distortions of drawing or the ubiquitous, saturated Yves Klein blue which serves everywhere as both figure and ground, originate in a principle of equivalences, they are really an extreme, mannered resuscitation of a modernist corpse by all the exaggerated means necessary to hide its fallacies. Matisse would probably have abhorred the lack of measure in an art out of balance.

The viewer implied by Whiteley's *Self Portrait in the Studio* remains determinedly heterosexual, white and male. This, of course, reflects Western art's traditional mode of address, as opposed to its traditional audience which has often been female. These desires have been coded into pictures like Whiteley's for so long that they seem natural: the tabloid, bohemian ambience of Whiteley's carefully decorated pad – its hint of free sex, drugs, the psychedelic distortions of perspective, and bird's-eye viewpoints – appeals to prurient curiosity. While the picture is cleverly knowing – the reference to Matisse is overt, images of art are scattered all through the painting, a sculpture is positioned like a rocket ready for take-off – it is also reverent. This reverence has none of the irony or parody of classic modernism; Whiteley's picture will not bite its owner's hand, since the history of art is taken for granted as a source of validation rather than contestation or disgust. Thus, at the epicentre of all lines of sight is the heroic, tortured face of the artist. Reflected in a small mirror, the painter is the centre of the picture's spatial vortex, and the space of the painting is already disappearing down this vortex, collapsing into a dependent series of already exhausted self-validations (the artist as hero, the artist as romantic seer, the artist as existential outsider) like water down a plughole.

1 Melbourne-based art critic Chris McAuliffe developed this insight in an unpublished paper on Brett Whiteley's orientalism.

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2 Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" [1908], reprinted in Herschel Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968, p. 135.

p:2

p:1 Brett Whiteley, *Self Portrait in the Studio*, 1976, oil, collage, hair on canvas, 200.5 x 259 cm. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales.

p:2 "I want to leave a nice well-done child here: 20 Australian artists" (installation view), curated by Harald Szeemann as John Kaldor's "Art Project 2", Bonython Galleries, Sydney, April 1971. Photograph courtesy John Kaldor.
The photograph shows Harald Szeemann installing the exhibition in Sydney with the unusual collaborative painting by Brett Whiteley, Tony Woods and William Pidgeon, *Linked Portrait*, 1971, mixed media on wood, 373 x 462 cm, shown in the background. The exhibition travelled to the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, in June 1971.

Introduction

Peripheral Vision: Contemporary Australian Art 1970-1994 is a critical survey of Australian art during the last two decades, commencing with the moment of modernism's obvious obsolescence. The book is an introduction to its subject, surveying contemporary art through the work of a limited number of artists and charting a narrative introduction to many – but by no means all – of the ideas current in art from the 1970s onwards. The criteria for inclusion were that the art discussed should reflect, even if to reject, the great contemporary artistic narratives of postmodernism and post-colonialism; these complex, multi-faceted narratives were also seen in popular culture and even in political life in Australia's movement towards a republic. A few artists are profiled in depth, but many well-known names are completely omitted because the book offers a series of close discussions rather than academic disquisitions or a lengthy catalogue of artists. For the same reason, *Peripheral Vision* is largely a tale of two cities – Sydney and Melbourne – although much important art was produced outside these large centres. A definitive, balanced account of the themes covered in this book is not yet possible.[1]

It is the particular achievement of late modernism in Australia, of which Whiteley was one of the last representative figures, to have modernism and, later, postmodernism, adopted as the paradigmatic versions of contemporary art even though other visions of contemporary art, such as traditional landscape painting and tonal realism, are still practised by a considerable number of artists.[2] From this point of view, Brett Whiteley is already a distant, but historically necessary, Old Master; artists such as Albert Tucker or Arthur Boyd, members of the "Angry Penguins" generation who came to prominence in the 1940s, are ancient dinosaurs. There are, then, many different art worlds. The milieu of postmodern, late modern and postcolonial art described in this book and seen in state public galleries during survey exhibitions such as Perspecta, held every two years at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is only one of these art worlds. A work such as Debra Phillips' 1993 Perspecta installation, *Sillage #1*, 1993, can be accommodated only with considerable difficulty by traditional definitions of art, but finds a place immediately inside the wide boundaries traced here. Modernist art survives beside postmodern art, defensively aware of its own conservatism and stuffy appeals to notions of quality. The art made by conservative landscapists is another example of a different art world, ignored by art critics and fashionable magazines, with its own networks of galleries, clubs and magazines. Each art world understands the words *contemporary art* differently.

The world of Australian art changed radically over the last two decades: prosperous galleries closed because of insolvency; major reputations were questioned; new names and interest groups moved to centre stage. Although the social and economic situation of art remained, in broad terms, the same – a luxury commodity consumed by very few in a fragile, economically dependent, late-capitalist culture – contemporary art achieved a fashionability in the 1980s that was as remarkable as it was short-lived.

The apparent calm and glacial certainty with which critics passed judgement on art several generations ago can be seen today as a remarkable and carefully contrived achievement. Although critics often refer to widely held and ostensibly stable historical judgements, the 1990s are marked by widely divergent opinions – not only about the merits of different artists but, more fundamentally, about the aims of evaluation, criticism and culture itself. An identifiable art world clearly separate from that of mass culture no longer exists. Acceptance of the apparently universal basis of modern art (the fundamental, "pure" qualities of visual order: colour, line, form and so on) has crumbled.[3]

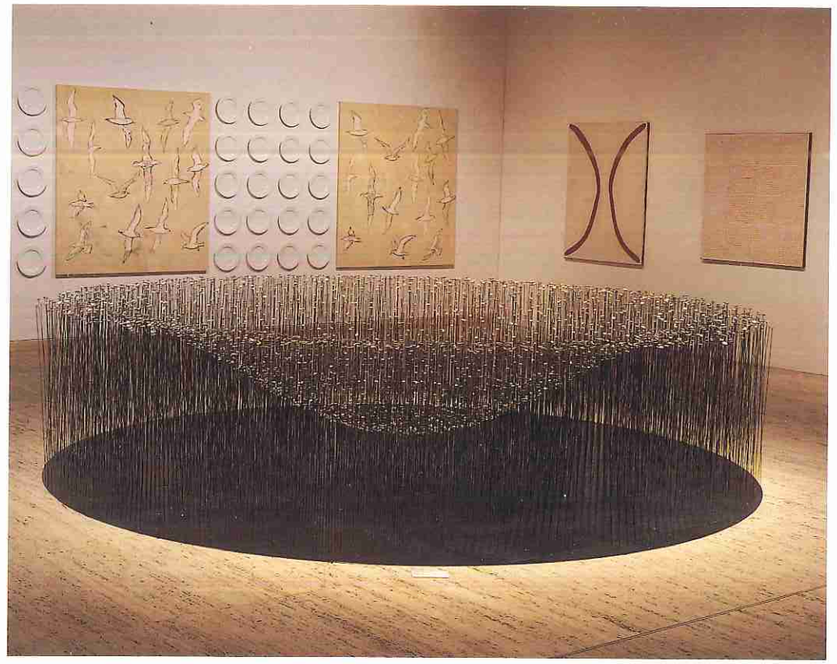
The art of the 1970s, examined in the first chapter of this book, is an essential backdrop to more recent work. For the first time since then, installation, performance and conceptual art have become crucial to the definition of contemporary culture. Emerging and mid-career artists alike employ these forms to make work regarded as significant and reflective of our time. Feminist analysis, brought to art in the 1970s by the Women's Art Movement, continues to be one of the most important influences on contemporary art, with most artists affected to different degrees by the analysis of identity as a gendered construction. A desire to privilege the marginal and perverse is also absolutely central to both the 1970s and the 1990s.

The middle chapters of this book describe the impact of postmodernism, suggesting that even

1 As this is necessarily a selective account, I would encourage readers to explore other sources. There are relatively few books on Australian contemporary art. These include monographs on individual artists and a few anthologies of essays by different art critics. Some of the best, and most up-to-date, published sources on contemporary Australian art are not books. The exhibition catalogues of state galleries, contemporary art spaces and, often, commercial galleries, have long essays analysing the art on display and are usually well-illustrated, with detailed bibliographies and resumés on the artists. There are several art magazines, including *World Art*, *Art & Text*, *Agenda*, *Eyeline* and *Art and Australia* that sympathetically cover contemporary art. Magazines and catalogues are held in large academic libraries. For thoughtful, revisionist discussions of important general themes in recent Australian art, see Ian Burn, *Dialogue*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991. The essential history of Australian art (significantly, ignoring everything except painting) is Bernard Smith and Terry Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991. The main dictionary of Australian art is Alan McCulloch and Susan McCulloch, *Encyclopaedia of Australian Art*, revised edition, Allen & Unwin, Melbourne, 1993. For the art of the 1970s, see Paul Taylor (ed.), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*, Art & Text, South Yarra, 1984, and Anne Marsh, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-92*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993. For excellent texts and illustrations on Aboriginal art, see Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking, London, 1989.

2 See Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators: The Sydney Alternatives in the Rise of Modern Art, Literature and Ideas*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986.

3 From the decades after World War II until the 1970s, contemporary art in Australia was decisively shaped by international modernism. Employing the idioms of modernist (usually cubist- or expressionist-derived) abstraction, local artists during the 1940s and 1950s placed themselves in opposition to groups for whom more traditional forms – such as landscape painting – represented a desirable, conservative synthesis of old and new, provincial and international. During the 1970s, differences between the avant-garde – the cutting edge of contemporary art – and an increasingly large institutional network of state galleries, contemporary art spaces and art magazines began to diminish.



Right: Australian Perspecta 1994 (installation view), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, October 1993. The photograph features Debra Phillips, *Sillage #1*, 1993, installation, bronze and steel. Collection: News Ltd.

though our period is postmodern, there is no coherent postmodern style or school of artists, for the impact of postmodern ideas has been highly variable. Even older artists have been profoundly affected by the force of postmodernism – by its recontextualisation of modern history and art. So what do postmodern artists share? They refuse the categorical imperatives of much modernism, which were the mythologies of originality and uniqueness of vision. Postmodernism defined itself as a rupture – against a modernism conceived falsely as monolithic in the superficial rhetoric of throwaway art magazines and art-school tutorials. In the early paintings of artists such as Nolan, Tucker and Whiteley, modernist art had also seen itself as a disruptive fracture in the cultural landscape. Perhaps most importantly, postmodern culture is aware that every painting, every statement and every judgement has the traces of other paintings, statements and judgements. As a perspective that sees art as always embedded in discourse, this is definitely not end-of-the-line cynicism.

Another viewpoint shapes the latter half of the book – that of postcolonialism. The cosmopolitan hyperreal of postmodern theory, with its exclusively televisual world of glancing images and media haze, did not exactly apply to the experience of Australian artists in the 1980s and 1990s. Australian culture, to say the least, was an extreme, atypical case of postmodern experience. Thus it was argued that the concepts of Western postmodern culture did not represent a universal experience, and that it was necessary to question the metropolitan perspective on regional culture because, to a considerable degree, postmodern assumptions reinscribed the conceptual boundaries of centres like New York. Art history continues to reproduce these discourses of the centre because the glamour and attraction of world centres like Paris and New York are so commanding from a provincial distance and because history incorporates revisions only slowly.

Cultural domination is still at play in contemporary Australian art, and is located in the long and majestic history of Western art from Renaissance Italy to the impeccably elegant, postmodern art magazines of Europe and America. It is just as important, then, to examine how and where differences have been produced. Australia's isolated position conditions the production of the metropolis's pale shadow but perversion of the master's language slyly deflects its domination. This ambiguity is the underlying subject of this book.

Next page: Stelarc, *Event for Penetration/ Exploration*, 1976, performance, Museo Universitario, Mexico City. Photograph: Xicohtencatl Pavia Castro. © Stelarc.