

Perhaps more words have been declaimed about what Australian art 'should be' than what it is. Every shift in the course of art in this country has sparked off clamorous debate and, regardless of how the various positions have been defined, each side has assumed a proprietorial relation to 'the future' of art in Australia. From the late nineteenth century to the present the battle lines have set up diverse polarities: between generations; between figurative and abstraction; between different attitudes to influences and sources; between nationalism (or regionalism) and internationalism (or the universal); between individuality and conformity; between the traditional and the modern (or the avant-garde); between fashion and originality, and many more, according to the historical moment. The passionate advocacy of positions has produced a predictable range of exaggerations, distortions and misrepresentations.

Yet, on another level, this variety reflects a more fundamental cultural rift: the contradiction between culturally specific and dependent factors within artistic expression in Australia. There is nothing fixed in the terms of the contradiction or their interaction. However their continual reworking and redefinition have informed, at some level, all cultural production in this country, fashioning its distinctive character and even its vitality. Some people still argue that Australian culture is fundamentally anti-intellectual, yet the continuing tensions of that contradiction have fed a stream of intellectual debate engaging the most influential figures of the past hundred years, even those who deny its existence or significance. As new ideas have been encountered and taken up, they have become absorbed in this process — witness the kinds of arguments towards which structuralist tools have been employed in a magazine like *Art & Text*. Methodological allegiances shift, but the conflict persists.

A basic point is this. Given the cultural make-up of this country, it is no less characteristic or typical to produce an art whose dependence on that of another country is undisguised, than it is to produce an art whose specificity makes its values virtually inaccessible to other cultural traditions. But the interdependence of these 'extremes' means that neither is possible without the other. The art of *The Field* needs to be understood in such terms. *The Field* was no more an heroic beginning than it was a cultural aberration — despite those views being popular with its supporters and detractors. The art was no less complex

or 'legitimate' than any other art produced in this country, yet there is perhaps no other single event which has been so consistently framed within simplistic assumptions.<sup>1</sup> Some account of the origins of this approach can be gained by examining the language of the critical response of the time.

The contending accounts of *The Field* were typical in their extremism and in the exclusivity of adopted positions. The critic for the Melbourne *Herald*, Alan McCulloch, denigrated 'the wholesale imitation of another country's abstract art' and argued that 'to most Australians . . . an art without its regional differences would be a soulless art' which, 'if adopted, would soon bring art itself to an end.'<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Melbourne *Age* critic, Patrick McCaughey, labelled as 'ludicrous' the idea of 'a discernible Australian or regional nuance as an essential ingredient of artistic excellence'. 'What,' he argued, 'are we to call the regional nuance in the work of such major figures as Fairweather, Miller, Balson, or Kemp? The question makes the Australianist case about Australian art self-evidently absurd.'<sup>3</sup>

The gallery, according to McCulloch, was playing a negative role, given the extent to which 'the modern art museum [can] create artificial standards of value.' Similar dismissive comments were elicited from dealer Rudy Komon and artists Len French and Norma Redpath, describing the exhibition as a 'tired idiom', 'extraneous to Australian art' and being 'a complete void'. When shown in Sydney, James Gleeson and Laurie Thomas saw the art as confirming the triumph of conformity over individuality. Underpinning this reaction was the sense of rejection of the artistic 'beach-head' gained overseas by the generation of the 1940s and 50s, consolidated through the Whitechapel and Tate exhibitions of Australian art in the early 1960s. Donald Brook summed up the feeling: ' . . . the Antipodean heroes now in their maturity suddenly discover their work to be unfashionable — and are understandably resentful because there is no reason to think it has suddenly become inferior. It is distasteful, having been reared on a fine myth of the artist as timeless genius, to swallow what looks like a squalid new myth of the artist as fashion-follower, responsive to what may become almost seasonal changes of taste.'<sup>4</sup>

The rhetoric of 'the new' — 'the new generation', the 'new abstraction', as if suddenly a 'tradition of the new' could be appealed to and was justification in itself — recurs in much of the supportive

criticism. The 1960s art boom in Australia relied heavily on 'new money' made since the second world war and by the late 1960s this was being fuelled by a booming stock market. The Antipodeans and the Sydney 'abstract expressionists' had their own established patterns of patronage, whereas the new patrons needed a new art, with a 1960s cosmopolitan look to distinguish themselves from preceding taste. Of equal significance for the generation defined by *The Field* were the structural changes then occurring within art education, which opened doors to secure livelihoods previously unavailable to most of these artists. Critical support (notably by McCaughey, Elwyn Lynn and, to a lesser extent, Donald Brook) and curatorial patronage (by Brian Finemore, John Stringer and Daniel Thomas) were instrumental in the 'new art' rapidly gaining institutional acceptance.

In reviews, the 'look' of the work was described in terms of common characteristics (colour, scale, non-expressiveness, serial repetition of 'geometric' forms), while the break with earlier abstraction in Australian art was seen to confirm an identification with an internationalist perspective. Finemore, in particular, saw *The Field* as identifying a new 'style'.<sup>5</sup> Other writers and curators emphasised the range of approaches encompassed, using this as a way of avoiding the problematic of 'style' altogether. McCaughey, restricting his reference to the sense of a 'personal' style, argued that *The Field* was: '... not offering a new style but ... a different convention, a different set of shared beliefs and presuppositions about the nature of the work and the role of the Australian artist. What this new convention seeks is a more deliberate alignment of Australian art with the modernist tradition.'<sup>6</sup> Underlying these semantic manoeuvres was, of course, an awareness of 'style' having derogatory implications in an Australian context, of it being an uncomfortable recognition of dependency.

The deflection of the problem of style into 'larger' questions of modernism was an attempt to legitimise this art in an Australian setting. In the 1960s in Australia, there having been almost no recognition of the tradition of the avant-garde, its appearance at this point could not be justified by historicism, by an appeal to historical necessity. In the 'logic' of the New York scene, 'hard-edge' painting reacted against and displaced Abstract Expressionism; in Australia it displaced Antipodean imagery and the abstracted 'landscapes' of

Sydney's abstract expressionists. Shifts in Australian art do not conform to an avant-garde structure on the model of New York, though the art can and does readily accommodate avant-garde styles. However, many of the qualities which characterise an avant-garde movement — newness, novelty, attention-seeking scandal and shock — do not travel well. In a country like Australia, typically on the receiving end of avant-garde initiatives, the 'shock' is usually a well-rehearsed piece of theatre involving artists, critics, dealers, galleries, collectors, funding bodies and perhaps even the public. The status of each of these is seen to be slightly enhanced by acquiescing to the determining role of a dominant centre, further transferring the determination of value away from peripheral cultural centres. This process also acquiesces to the intellectual dominance of the centre, thereby confirming the so-called anti-intellectualism of Australian culture.

Despite all this, the contradictory character of art in Australia produces a 'distancing effect' which mediates any stylistic or intellectual dependency. One way this is evidenced in the art of *The Field* is through the 'illogical' stylistic shifts undertaken subsequently by many of the artists. This 'cultural distancing' accounts for the vastly different concerns within the critical debates surrounding such art in Australia and the United States. This emerges as a crucial determinant in any discussion of the dependency of the style or its conventions. In New York, the critical supporters of Greenberg's 'modernist painting' (or 'post-painterly abstraction'), having dismissed Pop Art as 'novelty', were now locked in battle with the Minimalists, whose art they attacked as 'theatrical'. The Minimalist artists carried their own case against the Greenbergian critics, with the conflict revolving around the kinds of aesthetic (and other) relationships possible for the spectator and questions of relative values and implications.

This conflict scarcely emerged in Australia. In *The Field*, both tendencies sat side-by-side, along with references to Constructivism, Bauhaus, 1930s abstraction, and even traces of Pop Art. Perhaps the only instance of the conflict occurred in a brief exchange appearing in the pages of *Art and Australia* in 1970. Mel Ramsden (writing from New York, but adopting the Duchampian pseudonym 'Bill Indman') responded to an article on Syd Ball by Patrick McCaughey, berating him for his wholesale appropriation of the Greenberg/Michael Fried formalist methodology; Ramsden's attack was not on grounds of the

legitimacy of such art in an Australian setting but rather in defence of the Minimalist position. Faced with justifying his advocacy against an assault from that unexpected quarter, McCaughey (by then also in New York) responded by appealing to the aesthetic and intellectual dominance of American art: 'Basically I would argue . . . (i) the interest, distinctiveness and quality of Syd Ball's painting lies in its acceptance of many of the disciplines of American post-painterly abstraction . . . (ii) the so-called 'formalist' critique of those disciplines is the most penetrating and convincing available.'

A sense of the authority of (some forms of) American art had been building up in Australia prior to 1968: from the *Michener Collection*, which toured in 1964, to the huge *Two Decades of American Art* in 1967, the flow of art magazines from overseas to the visit of Greenberg in early 1968. In Australia, the discussion of many of the questions about 'style' and 'modernism' were circumscribed by the impact of Greenberg and by McCaughey's endorsement of that particular formula for recognising significant art. Here to deliver the inaugural Power Lecture, Greenberg was received as something of a guru, and his authoritative account of the 'Style of the Sixties' eclipsed most other critical writing.

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We have been arguing that the art of *The Field* had both culturally dependent and specific characteristics, but that this complexity has been ignored equally by its critics and champions.

In terms of its dependency, there is yet to appear anything resembling an adequate analysis. In America, the general style has been criticised as barely disguised metaphors for corporate power, which required 'no-deciphering of the conventions of art . . . for the corporate homage of this art to come across to its patrons.'<sup>8</sup> Its forms have also been described as 'the perfect vehicles for the image of the technological

myth: a myth . . . which equated perfection with efficiency, potency with size, seriousness with lack of emotion, and success with money.'<sup>9</sup> Moreover, much of American art of the 1960s was an 'art-for-export' — Warhol's Coca Cola bottles recolonised the 'third world'; Judd's minimalist boxes fed the hi-tech fantasies of European countries rebuilt on US 'aid'; Noland's corporate aesthetics silently moved into the 'sterling bloc'.

What then does an acceptance of a so-called international style mean in specific terms in an Australian context? Why, for example, was the art regarded as so 'radical' here by its proponents? What, in a peripheral cultural setting like Australia, were the factors which sustained the (romantic) appeal of early abstraction in European traditions (e.g. Suprematism and Constructivism) but which at the same time ignored earlier abstraction here (Balson, Hinder et al.)? How did many of these artists respond to the expanding influence of the US in Australian cultural life? How did the 'radicalism' of that moment interact with the growing opposition to the role of the US and Australia in Vietnam? Why did so many of the artists experience the style as 'liberating' at that time? What was the pre-history of ideas and positions brought into play in the decade preceding *The Field*? How was dependency experienced by the artists of this generation and how should its character and origins be accounted for?

If the organisers of *The Field* set out to do no more than isolate one tendency in Australian art, the consequences far exceeded their expectations. If the attempt to identify a coherent style failed, if the stylistic shifts represented have subsequently proved no more or less significant than others, and if the polarities of critical response merely reinforced the norm, then that suggests it was the new role of the institution which marked the significance of the event. The rhetoric of 'the new' and the 'logic' of an institutionalised avant-garde was legitimised by *The Field* exhibition and subsequently reproduced in the survey exhibitions, project shows and the Sydney Biennales of the 1970s, in the acceptance of the idea of an avant-garde by the major institutions, in the Australia Council, and in the collecting policies of the Australian National Gallery. To concentrate therefore on the 'look' of the exhibition is misleading. Rather, the institutional sponsorship of an 'avant-garde' context for contemporary art in Australia was itself the major historical initiative of *The Field*.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 See, for example, Gary Catalano, *The Years of Hope: Australian Art and Criticism 1959-1968* (OUP, 1981).
- 2 Alan McCulloch, 'Letter from Australia', *Art International*, September 1969, p. 62.
- 3 Patrick McCaughey, 'The Significance of The Field', *Art and Australia*, December 1968, p. 235.
- 4 Donald Brook, 'Young and New Ideas Take Over Art', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 1968.
- 5 Brian Finemore, 'One World', *Freedom from Prejudice* (N.G.V. 1977) p. 99. 'This style is not indigenous but the conditions attendant upon its birth in New York are now characteristic of any western twentieth century metropolis, and there is no reason to suppose that the universal truth found in acknowledging the flatness of the picture plane should be any less valid in the Melbourne work of Dale Hickey than in the paintings of his American mentors.'
- 6 McCaughey, op. cit.
- 7 Patrick McCaughey, letter to the Editor, *Art and Australia*, September 1970, p. 121.
- 8 Max Kozloff, 'American Painting during the Cold War', *Artforum*, May 1973.
- 9 John Tagg, 'American Power and American Painting: the development of Vanguard Painting in the US since 1945', *Praxis*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1976).

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# The Field Now

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