THE SUPPLEMENT

These reports of the Art(s) Now Symposium at the Griffith University were written to present an overview of the event. The views expressed are those of the authors. Allowance should be made for the fact that each contribution's dated was written to be presented.
THE ROLE OF THE SUPPLEMENT WILL BE EXPANDED IN FUTURE ISSUES TO INCLUDE CRITICAL WRITINGS, ESSAYS, AND DEBATE ON ARTS ISSUES. WE HOPE TO ESTABLISH A NETWORK OF WRITERS AND ARTISTS WHO WILL PROVIDE THE CONTRIBUTING BASE FOR THE ARTS MAGAZINE DUE TO BE LAUNCHED IN JULY '87. ARTICLES ARE BEING SOUGHT FOR FUTURE ISSUES AND PEOPLE INTERESTED IN WORKING WITH THE EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE SHOULD CONTACT THE ALLIANCE ON 2212842.

Maureen McMundi is a West Indian critic teaching at Glasgow University, and Heidelberg Summer School. She has been in Brisbane for three months working on a follow up volume to her first book: POST SPACE (University of Glasgow Press 1980).

Urszula Szulakowska is a lecturer in Fine Arts at the University of Queensland.

Graham Coulter-Smith - Educationalist/Academic/Writer.

Robert Whyte - Novelist/Entertainer.

David Baker - Bread baker and O.C.A. worker.
On October 24 and Saturday October 25, 1986, the School of Humanities at Griffith University held an inter-arts symposium discussing and documenting new developments in art, literature, music, performance, cinema, video and cultural theory.

DAY 1 - LITERATURE, POST-MODERNISM AND POST COLONIALISM, and ART PRACTICES AND POLICY IN A TIME OF RECESSION.

The needs of academics, theorists, and practitioners, rarely the same, are often hostile to one another.

Nick Zurbrugg's achievement in staging this symposium was therefore remarkable. Its diversity encouraged communication between the participants, and in absorbing the information, it encouraged a sort of mosaic thinking. Critical disciplines pursue their specialisations with the earnest fervour of the way. When the implications of a perspective threaten to overwhelm your RAM, you have to decide on some strategies to prevent burnout. It's not easy to cope with information overload, even when it's in your own field. Defence mechanisms against equipment failure tend to make you more negative towards the material, and it's very easy, but not very productive, to cry "bullshit".

The best approach, while difficult, is to absorb the material with critical attention, listen to everything, and hope that some of it sticks. This may cause your brain to explode, but what's an exploded brain between friends?

As ever, tone, verbal facility, and command of jargon will impress. Here too, one must be wary of too quickly dismissing the authoritative, fluent, but incomprehensible speaker. On the other hand, after a morning of heavy bricolage, it's very easy to dismiss the statements of a speaker just because you can understand them.

Tom Shapcott, poet, anthologist and now novelist, opened the Symposium with a talk on the genesis of his novel 'The White Stag of Exile', describing the making of a book which extends traditional novelistic techniques with use of documentary research. Focussing on his own experience and supplying information about the background to his novel in answer to a manifest need (the book is being studied at Griffith).

It was left to Helen Tiffin, therefore, to begin talking theory. Her command of the vernacular was awesome. With formal precision and lots of big words she presented observations on Post-Modernism and Post-Colonialism, with reference after some introductory comments, to Nigerian and Indian writers.

Jock Haclead from Griffith University spoke with some theatrical presence and great conviction on the futility of post-modernist debate without a definable modernist literature, and illustrated his argument with "The Crying of Lot 49" a book by Thomas Pynchon, who like many writers have demonstrated post modernist techniques before the postmodernist era. It became clear that literature to the critic is analogous to the relationship of the scientist to the Universe. It's a big place. Seek and ye shall find. Dream up a theory, and you will find evidence for it. Practice in literature in fact is extremely sophisticated, having generated for the last 80 years at least many of the ideas which are now current in deconstruction. Jock was the first of the morning to make elegant jokes at the expense of Roland Barthes. The Death of the Author, Peter Anderson was to say later, was the extent of most people's knowledge of the critic who is remembered for a book title. Jock McLeod demonstrated with his remarks on Pynchon, that although the author may be dead, it's going to be a long funeral.

Richard Read, from the University of Queensland's Fine Arts Department approached from the side of the visual arts, showing connections between American modernism and the New York Poets.

Peter Anderson spoke of the implications for the post modernist concept of authorship which were inherent in the writings of Ern Malley, the celebrated literary hoax perpetrated on Max Harris when he was editor of Angry Penguins magazine in the 40s. Certain attitudes of authorship where teased out during the prosecution and subsequent trying of the Ern Malley case which Peter Anderson showed threw an interesting light on current debate concerning the author's position.

In the final address of the morning's session Robert Whyte, a Brisbane writer spoke of the effect modernism and postmodernity has had on mainstream practice. His comments were general observations from a broad experience of Australian literary and writing circles. Once again, the
proposition was put that post modernism was irrelevant to a practice which, unlike the visual arts, had really shown very little of the influence of modernism. Robert Whyte referred to his own works and the experimental techniques he had employed in fiction writing. Critical attention, he argued, was extremely conservative and usually dismissive of experimental or avant garde influences.

In the afternoon Jill Scott spoke around a selection of videos from a large recent exhibition of video art in Sydney. Jill Scott is a prominent artist in the field and having been in Japan to pursue technological developments, now has access to the very latest equipment, via the industry and some educational institutions. Jill spoke on the effect the new technologies were having, their possibilities, and their dangers. In her own work, she had turned to the mainstream areas which most traditionally allowed visual experimentation in telling a story. Her science fiction material, drawing on clichés, archetypes, and the overturning of the male-dominance of that field were combined. The theme of the afternoon, practice and policy in recession, weren’t particularly addressed, except by example. Possibilities still exist in some fields.

In the afternoon brief addresses were given by people involved with alternative art spaces in Brisbane, summed up by Sarah Follent of the Australian at the end of the session. Peter Cripps spoke about his IHA and his perception of its context. Paul Andrew, Director of THAT Space, was unfortunately not able to deliver his talk. THAT, the most progressive and vital of the currently existing Art Spaces, has contributed invaluably to Brisbane’s Artists and audience, with its exhibitions, its studios, and generally as a focus for activity.

Janelle Hurst, Director of O’FLATE, spoke to 80 slides showing O’FLATES activities. Her presentation veered crazily into performance on occasion, and proceeded with bewildering speed. A type of urgent Queensland tergivisation was noticeable in the erosion of the borders between art and life. Adam Wolter provided computer generated imagery to accompany the slides, and an experiment involving a volunteer from the audience proved demonstrably the non-existence of a higher Intelligence, vindicating the four atheists in the audience.

Allan Vizents spoke about the context of the Performance Space in Sydney, and in Sarah Follent’s summing up, despite lack of time, a vague picture emerged of the chaos behind the chaos that is Brisbane art practice.

In the evening session, enlivened by drinks, Tom Shapcott read from the final section of his novel, were the juxtaposition of poetic and documentary material presented a discontinuous but perfectly understandable narrative.

Ros Bandt presented two marvellous pieces of sound sculpture. The first was a recording of an elaborate music box, resonant in an echoing space. A film and slides accompanied her second piece of all natural sounds, recorded in hydrothermal turbulence.

Michelle Andringa and Virginia Barrat portrayed gestural clichés with an agonizingly accurate eye for detail, in a performance which dealt with continuing relationships at a distance, and Allan Vizents’ urbane, and urban stories ‘urban life and attitudes’ continued drawing on everyday life for material. Throughout the day some very convincing performances were given by artists who portrayed critics, writers, theorists, and even the general public with ironic wit, a subtle reminder of the postmodernity of enjoying yourself.
In her critique of Liz Gross and Carol Pateman's *Feminist Challenges*, Carol Ferrier made the observation that in the "new" feminism, the central displacement has been, not bourgeoisie ideology, but class politics. The implications of this are that strategically, the women's movement should marginalize itself from the working class struggle, because the working class is obviously one of the main repositories of phallocentrism (the example Ferrier gave from Gross's book was that of a woman receiving cat-calls from construction workers - i.e. rather than realizing they are both exploited under capitalism and doing something about it, there is seen to be no solidarity possible between the workers struggle and the women's movement).

We might say that Ferrier's criticism of Gross's feminism is that it has no "use-value", that it exists only to reproduce itself in the academy, and bears no relationship to people's actual lived experiences.

The question that this confrontation raises is basically "what then, is the job for academic feminism to do?" Unfortunately, due to a lack of conferences of this sort in Queensland, these issues are raised, but not given a chance to be fully explored.

What this symposium managed to do was to bring together a diverse group of academics from Griffith, University of Queensland and Queensland College of Art, as well as practicing writers, artists, and musicians in order to look at a number of issues specifically in relation to "art". Two days was simply not long enough to begin to explore the broad range of issues, so what is needed are more conferences of this sort.

Saturdays program consisted of a morning session on "Feminist Art and Theory" and an afternoon session "Theories of Contemporary Culture". This arrangement exemplifies one of the central problems still facing feminism - the "feminist theory" and "Theories of Contemporary
"culture" are perceived as being distinct categories, with a certain privileging of the latter. The problem again is one of lack of dialogue, which more symposiums of this sort might help to open up.

Liz Gross's contribution to the morning was "Kristeva, Irigaray and the Politics of Representation". Gross was initially concerned with breaking down the opposition between theory and practice: that the practice of art is never free from theory (having taught practicing artists at the Queensland College of Art I am well aware of the resistance to this type of statement- it is countered by a belief that to make art is an intuitive and direct process, despite the fact that this relies on a particularly Romantic theory of creativity), and functions according to conceptual as well as aesthetic practice. Gross argued that oppositions like Passion vs. Reason, and Creativity vs. Reflectivity can be subsumed into this basic theory/practice opposition.

Gross went on to present in point form what for her were the basic contributions of Kristeva and Irigaray- though it might be better to view these points as simply the basic presuppositions of much contemporary work:

1/. The analysis of representational systems from the point of view of matter. As material objects, representational systems exert a resistance to certain readings.

2/. Refusal of traditional boundaries: Art being seen as the products of intertextual relationships. Individual subjects are seen as sites through which texts are produced.

3/. Politics: politics here means the internal structure and the history of the arts; the inclusions and exclusions that make for various canons.
Psycho-analysis as major technique—questioning the notion of the founding author or creative subject. Reading the unconscious of the text.

Gross went on to explain Kristeva's familiar opposition between the Symbolic and the Semiotic orders, the Symbolic order as that structuring into which the polymorphously perverse desire of the body (the semiotic) is born. The semiotic order for Gross's Kristeva creates ruptures in the apparent unities of the symbolic. The general audience reaction to this-at question time was that it is all Romantic nonsense.

David Saunders's talk in the afternoon was on "Bordieau on Culture". Saunders' framing question was simply "what precisely is your act of choice? What sort of values etc. are working through you when you make a choice? Of course this is a very ambitious question and one which, of course, never quite got answered.

What Saunders did present was Bordieau's discussion on legitimate aesthetics. This relies initially on Kant: "Art is a special form of human activity", for Bordieau, belonging basically to the dominated faction of the dominant class. A diagram of this might look as follows:

Dominant class:

- cultural capital<---social capital<---economic capital
- (educational) (who you know) (self-explanatory)

Of course the dominant faction of the dominant class are those with economic capital, the intellectuals are seen as the dominated faction of the dominant class.

The key effect of having cultural capital, for Bordieau, is the possession of ease (although Carol Ferrrier was again picquant: "how can anyone have ease under capitalism?").

The point for Saunders' Bordieau was that intertextuality (the
ability to grasp references to other texts in a work) is an effect of the bourgeois aesthetic rather than an immersion into the work immediately given. What this means of course for Post-Modernism is that art exists purely for those who enjoy and have time to be involved in it - the appreciation of formal effects and allusion are simply not available to the general public.

Saunders went on to give the audience the latest buzz word that would get us into any party in Paris: "socially informed body". The socially informed body is perceived as being an artifact of culture, not a point at which the undetermined or unbound can be reached (the implications of this for Gross's Kristeva are interesting).

Saunders finished by explaining how the vandalism of art works might be seen as being the iconoclasm of the dominated.

Unfortunately, the entire symposium was too rushed to get any dialogue going on these issues, and we can only hope that there will be more in the future which can cover the ground with a little less rush and a little more ease.

David Baker
Q.C.A.
Play has become a key word in contemporary art theory. The term derives from the new French Thinking and basically it represents a loss of faith in structure and any concern for discerning universal meaning through ultimate structure. In terms of politics, the philosophy of play can be seen as a desire to subvert, transgress, or deconstruct modes of social representation which depend upon a totalising rationalising system.

In his book "The Postmodern Condition", Lyotard argues that the System is oriented towards statis. Play, then, becomes represented as the dynamic principle which can overcome the encroaching bureaucratisation of society.

In "The Postmodern Condition", Lyotard outlines an alternative to the homeostatic system: this alternative is the anti system. Where the totalising system values qualities of consistency, syntactic completion, and reduced complexity; the anti system values qualities of displacement, rearrangement, and irregularity. The key concept underlying Lyotard's model of anti system is imagination which is seen as the realm of uncertainty, it is essentially anti rational. It is the source of the "unexpected move", that will disrupt the plodding hegemony of logic. In his book, Lyotard creates a strong opposition between the the force of imagination and the stasis of systemic rationalism. He then interprets both in terms of narrative using the terms master narrative vs petit recit- or little narrative. Where master narrative sets up universalising rules which attempt to totalise and legitimate all discourse the little narrative has no such concern for totalisation or legitimisation.

The little narrative is playful and imaginative. In the wake of the legitimation crisis *1 Lyotard observes:
"We no longer have recourse to the master narrative. We need the petit recit, the quintessential form of imaginative invention." (60)

In political terms, Lyotard's playful narrative becomes an alternative to systems of political thinking which try to impose a bureaucratic vision of totality-an ultimate and universal representation of social reality. The little narrative is designed to deconstruct the master narrative by playful and imaginative rearrangements of data.

Lyotard is often vague concerning the nature of the little narrative, talking about it, for example, in terms of rhythm and forgetting, but at one point he describes the process of imaginative invention quite succinctly, defining it as:

"The capacity to articulate what used to be separate (by) connecting a series of data that were previously independent."

Lyotard's emphasis upon imagination and his definition of imagination in terms of what might be called montage seems to derive from his enthusiasm for aesthetics. An enthusiasm which motivates much of new French thinking.

So it might be interesting to examine Lyotard's ideas in terms of visual discourse, where ideas similar to Lyotard's have had currency for some time.

Imaginative play which involves, in Lyotard's words, "connecting a series of data that were previously independent" is quite apparent, for example, in Surrealist art.

(SLIDE)

This work, "THE DOMAIN OF ARNHEIM" (1962), by the Surrealist artist, Rene Magritte connects series of data that were previously independent. He connects the signifier bird with the signifier mountain. There is also some connection between day and night.

So we can see Magritte's painting obeys Lyotard's definition of the imaginative little narrative very well. A problem arises however when we analyse this work and find that it is a mythic narrative in the sense that Levi-Strauss defined
myth as an attempt to overcome contradiction by correlating apparently antithetical semantic categories. In this work the categories which are correlated are animate and inanimate or life and death.

However interesting such semantic play might be, it has little practical political value, and here we find a basic problem in Lyotard's definition of the little narrative. His definition is too vague to create a distinction between mythic narrative and practical narrative. Indeed he actively supports mythic narrative in "The Postmodern Condition" when he represents the rejection of fables, myths, and legends in western culture as an example of the cultural imperialism of scientific rational discourse. (27)

But if the little narrative is akin to myth, then we must question its political value, and here we come to the basic antagonism between play and politics. Politics tends to want to be practical. Politics after all is concerned with ideology- with social representation. Play, on the other hand, is more involved in the force of signification: the fundamental semiotic process which is the shifting and displacement of signifiers.

Lyotard has great faith in this process of displacement as an agent for social change. But we might observe that such rearrangements of data don't necessarily have any practical ideological impact. That is they can't necessarily transgress or subvert ideology and they don't necessarily reconstruct social representation...

We could just underline this by looking at some more examples of visual discourse.

Techniques of montage were developed in art within the antisystemic antiaesthetics of Dada and Surrealism, but today they are still a powerful strategy employed in so called postmodern art.

If we examine briefly two postmodern artists, we can see how Lyotard's definition of the playful little narrative is not really sufficient to justify the high hopes Lyotard
wants us to place it.

(SLIDE)
The first postmodern artist to look at is David Salle. Salle montages virtually anything onto anything in his works, and according to most art critics his intention is to avoid meaning at all costs. The title for this work is "B.A.M.F.V." which, like the images, is an apparently meaningless juxtaposition. If we examine the images we find a toothbrush, a piece of wire mesh covered in green paint and shaped like a leg, buttocks, breasts, an upside down face, an evil macho Donald Duck, a couple at a fancy dress party, a woman sucking her finger, and sketches made of a bull fight.

The first thing to recognise is that Salle obeys perfectly Lyotard's definition of the imaginative little narrative. Salle "connects a series of data that were previously independent".

But recently an Australian Marxist art critic accused Salle of celebrating the emptiness of signifying practices in a consumer society. And as we all must be aware strategies of playful montage are used quite a lot in mass media.

(SLIDE) Winston Advertisement.
(SLIDE) Cutex Advertisement.

If we go on to look at another postmodern artist, Barbara Kruger...

(SLIDE) "You Are Not Yourself"
we can see that Kruger's work here bears a certain resemblance to the fragmented montage of the previous example, however her work is quite different. And the reason why it is different is because it is not simply a little narrative. That is to say, it is not simply a montage of signifiers which were previously independent. This work maps onto a larger narrative-the narrative of feminism. And that larger narrative gives structure to the more cryptic imaginative narrative.

Barbara Kruger's work seems to tell us that a little narrative -playful juxtaposition of signifiers- is not enough in itself to generate any ideological effect. The little narrative seems to possess a purely aesthetic effect- the effect of pure signification as opposed to representation.
The little narrative may be a transgressive and subversive force but it is not the successor to the larger narrative. Indeed it needs the larger narrative in order to function ideologically. Lyotard seems to admit this in "The Postmodern Condition" when he observes that the system (15) must encourage new arrangements of data in order to combat its own entropy.

What he seems to be saying is that the little narrative can only create a practical meaningful effect with regards to the larger narrative. It is not as if little narratives are going to totally deconstruct and replace the larger narratives. It's just that you can't have one without the other. They are two aspects of the same system.

Footnotes:


*1 "legitimation crisis" is Habermas' term for the crisis in knowledge where all knowledge is seen as a provisional construct rather than there being any absolute truth.
The aim of the following paper is to provide some analogies from contemporary sub-atomic theory for certain aspects of Australian painting both of the present moment and from a slightly earlier period. It intends to offer some variety in an area of art-history either bogged down in linguistic theory or prone to very stale myths of origin.

In the title I was groping at expressing some sense of dislocation and hoping that this might indicate a mode of review, or provide, at least, a framework for discussion, of how Australian art since the mid-seventies has been affected by dislocation of place and time in its relations with the art of other continents, that is, by travel to those places and by the descent of 'others' on this country.

It is generally agreed that contact with 'overseas' is a good thing for art-practice in this country. It brings in new ideas into what could become an isolated stagnation. It is said that such contact has forced Australian artists, critics and historians to reckon, not just with the force of 'others' art, but also to assess the points of 'difference' between it and their own. One re-opens the centre-provincial debate here. This is not where I am heading for, however. It seems to be a debate which has little prospect of much further development theoretically. A general consensus languishes in it that, yes, we must travel and see the work of 'others' and, yes, they must see 'ours' and, yes, we must shunt all these heaps of artefacts all over the globe, depositing their-s here and ours there etc. Australia went 'international' in the seventies.

I am concerned not with the location of the events, of the points of contact, but with the interstices in the inter-action, with the breaks in the pattern, the gaps, the misunderstandings, the flights that were missed in either direction, the misheard announcements, the lost luggage that went to Hawaii, the badly digested meals in transit etc. etc. etc. in short, with those quantum gaps, the jumps in the stages of transformation from one state to another......I propose a theory taken from the positing of indeterminacy and complementarity in sub-atomic causality, tracks of action, reaction and transformation.
In the state of dislocation, there actually is no causality, no possibility of locating an originative cause and only a statistical possibility of determining an effect. In fact, effectively, determinacy and causality are separated from each other.

One can float a prediction but the airport of destination remains statistically uncertain. One might get anywhere in theory. Since origin and destination remain forever unknown, incapable of positioning or location, the consequence is that there is no possibility of characterizing a situation, a persona; there is no hope of structuring an identity which will not slip away and transform into another presence. Instead of the difference of this and other, there is always a break, a jump in which the entity finds itself occupying the position of the opposite pole. It itself can assume no difference, nor can this be assumed for it by a god-like objective other. For the other who controls the experiment is written into the quantum equation, is involved, and at any time can become the object of its own study. The theoretician falls into and impacts with the theory.

It is in the jumps, in the breaks that identity exists as an absolute. It is an unknown quanta or amount— a mathematically agreed unknown.

I quote George Alexander's *In Transit from the Third Degree Australian Mythological* (concerning sites)....

...At an airport the whole globe appears in complex seductive relationships to itself, the erotic differences at play always merging into the homogeneous scene were really only one language is spoken: Wievel kostet? C'est combien? How much? Quanto?....

...Between arrival and departure, the familiar and the strange, the real and the imaginary, the model and its image, there is just you at an airport, trying to locate your interlocutor, and the wind beyond the plate-glass walls....

...At an airport the only directions are In and Out, not Up and Down. At an airport you are neither Here nor There only Now....
In the midst of the dislocation, at the interstices of two multiplicities is absolute security. Lost, no-one can find you; unknown, the necessity to continually self-identify is absolved. There is no necessity, there is no determinacy...only absolute potential which has power because it is as yet undefined and, hence, the opposites have not cancelled; the choices have not been made. They have not been perceived as conflicts. To travel is better than to arrive......To arrive is to face the threat of self-definition and, hence, of the pattern....to be restructured into another enclosed form, to become another artefact in the musty galleries of the world museum.

Stay loose. Take off your shoes. Pour the vermouth...the dishevelled elegance of total disengagement...isn't that post-modernity? To loosely wear the transformations and to wait for the next jump? Not to question 'when?' or 'why?': not to strangle into tight structures the forms, but to abandon identity in order to move?

Kafka stalks those who fail to know the law. Better to stay outside the gate and circle the walls than to be bricked-up in the castle dungeon. Who wants to get in anyway? Those who quest form and posit security within a located structure. It's safer to be on the outside.

If all this sounds like a refusal to make a committment, that I am suggesting that the plodding of Australian cultural baggage overseas and the receiveal of their weighty cargo is a bad thing, that it leads to stereotypes, to history and from history into self-reflexive laws, that I am implying that there is something immoral in the quest for cultural inter-change...then I am. I am denying the possibility of 'interchange' as such, that is, the determining in advance what will be the object of the spectacle, what will be shown, what will be learnt through 'inter-change'......the effects are not predictable. One cannot control culture in this way, by the selected exhibition and viewing of objects because always something gets lost, something gets diverted in transit, the codes are displaced, dislocated, reversed on themselves...the effects of dislocation are innocent, the random result of chance connections. It is not a question of pollution of one culture by another and
where to set the bounds of contact. Control is a fallacy. It is control which is dangerous and not the lines of flight along which cultures and histories inter-change. Manipulation through the will to determine the outcome is the horror, not movement itself, not change in itself. (Whatever that change is.)

If there is anything at all optimistic about post-modernity, then it is this innocence of cause/effect relations, the impossibility of prediction, the unknown, and, thus, uncontrollable, jump from one state into another, the certainty of change and recoil.

Nor is this an advocacy of indifference posing as 'je ne sais quoi', though that passivity is tempting to adopt. Within the lines of flight is the necessity to change, to move. They have their own discipline. One does not stay in the airport bar, nor in duty-free. Go anywhere, but go. In the game of chess, one piece does not sit down on the board. Choices are eventually made. Consequences are not available to preview, but a booking is made and chances are high of arrival somewhere. To stay open to the next move is a rigorous act of self-discipline, of alertness and of not a little courage, since causality is no longer in effect in the flow of a constantly transforming multiplicity. If post-modernity has a noble aspect in this age of the non-heroic, then it is this act of surrender which is neither indifferent, nor is it passive, egg-like. To bend with the wind is not the same as resignation to fatalistic despair, nor to egotistical dandyism. Fall asleep and you die.

In specific terms of the study of Australian art since the second world war, this issue of contacts demands a closer study of the chance and hazard involved in making a connection with non-specific multiplicities.

With monotonous 'ennui' earnest studies have enumerated this influence of that artist as the result of journeys of bodies, or artefacts, in either global direction. But there is room for far more subtle studies which would (to change metaphors) examine the miscarriages and it is these studies which are lacking. Not just why modernism came to Australia and in what form in the earlier twentieth-century: nor just why, for example, Dada didn't.
Endlessly, history has analyzed what in the hodge-podge of styles and codes available to Australians was selected and why. More than that is needed. The most urgent necessary study at the moment is a highly specific analysis of the effects of illustration of art-works on Australian painting. Some noted cases have, of course, been recorded for the art of the thirties. Everyone comments on the especial effects on a country dislocated by time and the cost of transportation of anything (the sheer expense of obtaining information at all in this continent, irrespective of whether one is to accept or to reject it eventually.) However, no-one has looked at this dislocation in subtler theoretical terms. The lack of theory in the historical studies of Australian art is woeful and largely responsible for the sheer dreariness of the writing on it.

In the case of the art of the eighties, I can suggest a few examples which would tolerate closer study. An exhibition well-known to most people would be the 1984 Exxon International Exhibition, Australian Visions, shown first at the Guggenheim in New York and later, touring Australia. The text blips on in main-line art-historical terms about the quest for, and the psychological necessity of, a depiction of the Australian landscape and about the landscape's dominant influence on artists which reads very strangely against certain of the Peter Booth canvases, depicting him at his most omnivorously insect-like (2). The problem of national identity resurfaces yet again (and again and again): 'us here', located and specified, against 'them over there': the origins of the culture of difference through transferal from a European locale and an emplotment into the usual exotica of the myth of 'this' earth, 'us here', in this soil, still, stratified, personified.

In fact, the most striking aspect of the exhibition (apart from the good, solid, well-loaded paint on large canvases, crafted objects of a definite presence and locatable boundaries, just bursting with 'local' character and idiosyncracy) was an elusive, curious displacement which read like a slipping signifier in a chain of transference from location to location.

Sue Morrie's work, in particular, raised the question of whether
one was really examining an ostensibly isolated, particularized work (which the size and the sheer weight of paint urged one to perceive, that is, the placing of the work in question into the tradition of the self-contained oil with individual 'aura'). Others in that exhibition who raised the same question as to just exactly what it was that one was examining were Jan Murray and Mandy Martin. Dale Frank offered the same conundrum and not a few of Peter Booth's (thematically badly displaced) oils.

It is true that in the case of the post-modernist painting one always is expecting 'quotation' of codes. One dutifully accepts that one will have to look at any painting of the eighties, which has any pretensions to topicality, with one eye blinded, through a fuzz of other works sliding across it. (We all know the rules.) Nonetheless, there is a more specific way to get at the elusiveness of meaning and intention of post-modernist Australian painting of the past five years than by waffling through linguistic theory alone. That way is by directly, visually, studying the dominant means of obtaining the images of others, that is, of how Australian artists enter into the discourse of international codes. (This also applies to a dislocated state such as Queensland.)

This means is through illustration of art in magazines and journals. The character of the work of the Exxon artists is based less on the referants in the actual images which others painted elsewhere, than on the magazine illustrations of the details, the dislocated close-ups, of those images as originally purveyed in art-journals, or even in filmed reports. A part of a total image, reduced, isolated in a body of text (the totality may, or may not, be given within the article) is placed against other dislocated details. In Sue Norrie's works and, especially, in some of Mandy Martin's floating geometries, not so much a code is quoted, as an uncontrollably selected part of the code.

It is equivalent to what Roland Barthes was seeking as the effect of the 'filmic' which can be seen, paradoxically, only in the still image of the film. In other words, it is the interstices, the joins, the breaks, the gaps which are the condensation points
or locus of the essential of a code, or form, or a multiplicity.
( Gilles Deleuze, similarly, in Image-Mouvement develops an idea
of the film as a sequence of mobile cuts, rather than as a
structured entity.)

One stands too close to Norrie’s and Martin’s works. In fact, one
stands nowhere at all. One is not in the work, absorbed, for the
post-modernist quotation rejects that illusion of empathetic
entry of a work. Instead, it is claustrophobia, squeezed in somehow
between one page of a book and another, this screen and that screen.
It is not that the forms are constricted by their boundaries or
are ‘too big’. More subtly, one looks at the edges of the works
expecting extensions beyond those circumferences...where did the
rest of it go?

The size of the brush-work and the heavy impasto, also, are less the
vaunted ‘expressionism’ of the Australian landscape, than an effect
of a much smaller area blown up disproportionately. In short, they
look like the close-ups of another work somewhere else.

This is one example of what I have termed, quantum-leap
dislocation, which I suggest is peculiar to an Australian condition
and to a Queensland condition.

I am suggesting another type of art-history and critical study,
a negative history, which looks at the blanks, the spaces, the
gaps, rather than labours away at the deposits produced by
traceable cause and effect structures. And this is not to be the
type of art-history which queries why Australia never had this or
that characteristic of this or that style (which is even more
tedious and non-sequitur in the main). Art-history in this country
must specify the means by which transfers occur at all, and what is
lost and added in that transfer of travel in either hemispherical
direction.

That accidental mobility is a positive factor in the history of
Australian art. The unintentional is the creative factor, not the
pondered and mythic that is always super-self-consciously defining
its own character against alien invasions, or busily loading its
own baggage onto the universal space-ship.
Footnotes


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A 3D GLIMPSE OF THE WRITING PROCESS

(A personal experience of modernism in mainstream Australian literature)

With these comments of my own experience of literature in Australia, I hope to show that "Post Modernism" is irrelevant to mainstream practice. You'll note in these observations an absence of post modernist jargon. However, please don't dismiss what I have to say, just because you can understand it.

First, some general background. As I attended various educational institutions that tolerated creativity as part of the make up of a cultured citizen, I wrote poems and stories without thinking very much about it. I was simply trying to express my reactions to the world around me. I thought that "literature" wasn't writing, but something one found in famous books: the classics. I didn't really understand that people wrote these books.

The first inkling I had that it was possible to write literature was in an early novel by Aldous Huxley. The soul of his tenebrous youth crying out for poetry seemed immediate and relevant, where Keats and Shelley seemed remote. I didn't know then that the youth I so admired in Crome Yellow was a cynical parody of a mooning, poetry besotted adolescent. Nor did I realise that the reason Huxley appealed to me was because he was able to write in prose with the cadence and rhythm of "fine writing", a prose style that had been polished by the educated classes of English society since Shakespeare and reaching its ultimate expression in the Romantics. As an Australian growing up in an educated family, I unconsciously believed the myth that "culture" was synonymous with this pretentious, upper-class, British public-school sensibility.

Anyway, I got on all right reading the rest of Huxley's early novels, and other inoffensive Penguin authors, until I read James Joyce's Ulysses, which must be literature's version of "white knuckling".

Joyce introduced me to modernism, and although he was writing about Dublin, it was obvious he had gone further afield for his aesthetic attitudes.

This led me to look at what was happening around Joyce in Paris and in other European centres, and soon I became engrossed in the European artistic movements of the modernist era.

Initially I was captivated by surrealism. I came to admire futurism and dadaism as more pure, iconoclastic precursors, but surrealism moved me most because it allowed great scope for the imagination, and I felt the imagination was an accessible resource which crossed cultural barriers.
While exploring all this in Brisbane in the early 70s (mainly in the William Street Library) I didn't find much evidence in Australian writing that showed the effect of modernism. A few close friends shared my enthusiasm, but the establishment didn't. For a long time I worked in isolation. I got a writer's grant in 1976 to write a novel, but as I was reading explosive writers like Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Alfred Jarry, Leonora Carrington, Joyce Mansour and others, the form of the traditional novel seemed to me a touch conservative. I put my novel aside and wrote a great number of moody, imagistic prose-poems, inspired by the writings of the surrealists, Max Jacob in particular.

In 1978 I published some of these in a book called Negative Thinking which included surrealistic line drawings of mine and a number of poems by Peter Anderson, who launched the book with a legendary performance at the Baroona Hall. Much mystique surrounds that launching, where three Brisbane new wave bands played, (The Sharks, .4 and the Decimals, and Mother there's something in the attic and it Flaps), but what really happened was this: Peter Anderson, after reading loudly from inside a locked wardrobe on stage, suddenly burst free, and naked began reciting his poems and cutting his hair off with a big pair of scissors. Having shorn himself, he turned and attacked the mirror with the scissors. Finally it shattered and at that moment, the lights went out.

All this made for a successful launching, and the sale of many books. Having established some sort of profile, I began sending poems out to magazines. I soon found there was a literary scene around the small press magazines, the editors of which published each other's works in a sort of trade-off system, which kept the literary scene going.

I found the insular closeness of the scene claustrophobic, and much too "English Department literary" for me, and I was on the lookout for other outlets for my writing which would be more sympathetic to modernist, experimental work. About this time Peter Anderson and I launched the Poets Union in Queensland, and began introducing multimedia effects into poetry readings. Elsewhere in Australia this bias towards performance poetry in new writing was gathering strength. Melbourne poets Eric Beach, TTO, Jas Duke, and others were reading in pubs.

Also at this time I began to look at what more traditional, young, or "aspiring mainstream" poets were writing. I saw that many Australian poets in their 20s and 30s were being influenced by the American poets of the beat generation and beyond. The Black Mountain school, Robert Creeley's book of US poets, and figures
It was through sending things overseas that I discovered Anna Banana, a Canadian dada-ist and all round zany person living in San Francisco. Anna Banana was involved in "mail art". She had developed a correspondence network ranging over all countries of the world, involving the exchange of postcards, texts, altered books, home made, one off, ephemeral artworks, comments and manifestos. To be anonymous, I started using the name "Robot Wireless". The anonymity, the political and aesthetic freedom of mail art appealed to me enormously. I was actively sending and receiving stuff for a couple of years, working it into a postgraduate degree at Sydney's City Art, and finally organizing a number of exhibitions of collected mail art pieces in a Sydney gallery, publicised through ART NETWORK magazine.

As I have been overseas in non english-speaking countries since 81, these few last comments are to be seen as general observations from a distance. About the time I went overseas I abandoned mail art because of prohibitive mail costs, and used the linguistic umbrella of incomprehension to begin working on large scale fictions, which attempted to work with emotional and psychological effects occurring within the reader rather than on the surface of the page. This required conventional prose techniques. I began working in this area because I felt that modernist works, or works that tampered with their "form" were being dismissed after the reading of their surface effects, which could be read at a glance.

As far as I can tell, there is some tinkering with "theory" in the ivory tower end of Australian literary circles. This plunge into theory, no doubt a panic reaction inspired by the rise of theory in the visual arts, usually involves semiotic and post modernist jargon, and cannot always be distinguished from the humorous "bogus" theory written by funsters responding to the excesses of current theoreticians.

However it has become apparent that in relation to mainstream practice, the avant garde has shrunk in size, importance and effect. The mainstream seems to have returned, largely, to healthy, old fashioned "entertainment through representation" and "suspension of disbelief." Modernism in Australian literature, never very apparent, seems to have disappeared, and if post modernism is practiced, rather than just argued, I haven't seen it. Post modernist theory however has certainly been used to justify the resurgence of "genre writing", parody, and pastiche, all of have been traditional mainstream tactics.
One book which I have seen which is experimental, but at the same time mainstream was Jan McKemmish's *A Gap in the Records*. My own novel, *Manacles*, is quite conventional in technique, if one takes into account that it has been an amazing 45 years since the publication of *Pinnegans Wake*. In *Manacles* after a section which a recent review referred to as a "tangled web of self-referentiality bobbing along in the wake of James Joyce" I included a formal experiment which involved crushing down an old manuscript into a condensed form. It resulted in a passage the review described as "stream of rubbish". So far as I can tell, then, the mainstream tolerance of modernist experimentation seems, if anything, to be diminishing.