

FORGET THE AUSTRALIA EFFECT



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Are we wasting our time posting compelling Australian stories on the global art wall? Do we always have to reflect some kind of Australian effect? Surely we're better served accounting for more contingent cultural ventures that critically engage with broader fields of power. The recurrent fascination with Australia's place in the global curatorial mind is now hampered rather than helped by a paradigmatic politics of representation (and, as I have spent most of my professional life elaborating and defending this very paradigm, I feel that I can speak with familiarity here.) The thing is, however, that much contemporary art does not easily lend itself to such culturalist, textual or ideological frameworks. This is particularly true of indigenous art. It is also true of contemporary Australian projects that directly intersect with non-artworld interventions, such as environmentalism and related urban activism (areas in which I also have a particular interest). Yet we still use a generalised, postmodern politics of representation when pushing Australia's 'strong cultural narratives' in a globalised artworld, using 'market strength'—at home and abroad—as a key performance indicator.

The question of representation has become the latest variation of the well-egged "provincialism problem", recently posed by a roundtable conversation in this publication. How can Australia gain higher visibility when overshadowed by the current Euramerican-Asian "mutual gaze"?² Colin Chinnery, then curator of *SH Contemporary* in Shanghai, is doubtful that we can, for Australian art pales in comparison with "countries like India and China [who] can awe Western audiences with the visual impact of their major cultural aesthetic" in the "leading art carnivals".³ Fellow Shanghai-based curator and writer Christopher Moore agrees that, at the very least, regions like Australia require a more "marketable narrative".⁴

Historically, the "provincialism problem" is a loser's game, no matter whether we call upon the skills of art historians, critics, artists and now curators as quasi-marketing consultants. Australian art historian Bernard Smith acknowledged that, while local artists since colonial times have selected, rejected and adapted

metropolitan influences, ironically most realised that it is their difference rather than their derivation that made them of interest to the metropolitan centres.⁵ Yet even at her most 'Aboriginal', Margaret Preston barely passed as a modern exotic for wartime USA and Canadian audiences. Drysdale, Boyd and Nolan's equally unsubtle Antipodean postures gained muted applause in 1960s London. The ironic, neo-expressionist vernacular of Parr, Tillers and Unsworth (*An Australian Accent*, 1984) caused a bare ripple in postmodern New York. One might think it's time artists and curators put Bernard Smith's prognosis of *Place, Taste and Tradition* to rest.⁶ Art historians have also struggled with provincial branding. The consummate 1960s cosmopolitan Robert Hughes wrote *The Art of Australia* on the premise that waves of world history have constituted our provincial culture, and the study of influential, foreign schemata on a provincial artworld like ours might even tell us something about the centres themselves.⁷ Bernard Smith's protégé Terry Smith analysed the structural logic of metropolitan-provincial relations as an insoluble conundrum in 1974. The "provincialism problem" was a mindset as much as a geographical fact; we have no choice but to be provincial.⁸ Other art historians argued for more nuanced analyses of the interplays between globally linked provincial art worlds in particular historical periods.⁹

Participation in biennales and art fairs is both index and substance for *Broadsheet's* concern with Australian (in)visibility in an artworld of hegemonic, interlocked regional networks (Euramerica and Asia etc.). Biennales in particular demand that provincial artworks display a highly formalised and internationally legible regional content. In this schema, however, even indigenous Australian art is seen to lack the formal chutzpah to initiate 'game-changing' global art moves. In the postcolonial 'world game' playing field of the survey exhibition stadium circuit ("regardless of where they come from, artists have to be prepared to fight for their vision, and fight hard") the ground is not as level as we'd hoped.¹⁰ Chinnery affirms that Australian indigenous art performs poorly against the rich cultural traditions of the old (imperial) nations due to its "narrow" visual vocabulary (by that I guess he means it looks too traditional; i.e. "there's a valid question over whether it's contemporary... It cannot be used as a tool for recognition.")¹¹ Christopher Moore agrees, adding that "on the international scene Aboriginal art is generally not seen as being involved in the conversation comprising 'contemporary art', whatever that term might mean... Call it fashion. Complain about it if you will. But it won't change, so better to learn to work with the system."¹² As Terry Smith observed decades ago, this centre-periphery mindset invites provincial artists, curators and writers to ally a pseudo-ethnographic art in a formally novel manner to gain exchange value in the global art markets. If international curators feel that Australian Aboriginal art is not spectacular enough, maybe artists and art centre advisors need to attend more closely to issues of representation? So the story goes: we are told that these are the creative ingredients for game-changing, regional cultural narratives in the Big Picture. But, as Adam Geczy wryly observes, Australia's provincialism problem means that, whatever we do, we're always going to be short on artworld "editorial value".¹³

CRITICAL ISSUES

This sorry state of affairs suggests the need for a sound, critical praxis between politics, art practice, art history, criticism and curatorship. This is not solely an issue for Australian art writers. American academic Hal Foster suggests that 'neo-liberal' market pronouncements on contemporary art (such as those rehearsed by Chinnery and Moore) enjoy explanatory power in the art world due to a dearth of critical theoretical models. We need a new dominant paradigm, perhaps one that is at once agonistic, sustainable, anti-hegemonic.¹⁴ Fellow academic Vered Maimon disagrees. Who can say that today any paradigmatic artistic or theoretical model will guarantee a specific outcome? Unlike discussions of the postmodern, she argues, art and subjectivity within today's globalised cultural conditions cannot be reduced or accounted for through strategies of representation (or its limits).¹⁵ These thoughts are echoed in the environmental art field by Victor Margolin, who calls for "a new aesthetic to embrace the three categories of object, participation, and action without privileging the conventional formal characteristics of objects. In this aesthetic, the distinctions between art, design and architecture will blur as critics discover new relations between the value of form and the value of use".¹⁶ While I take issue with his demand for a singular paradigm for environmentalist art and design, his inclusive approach to creatively considering both aesthetic and instrumental issues in environmentalist art makes sense.

If we accept these arguments, it's worth considering their implications for talking about contemporary Australian art. For a start, it's time to strategically disaggregate unrepresentative images of the Australia effect, as it does not guarantee productive outcomes for artists and ideas locally or internationally, to borrow Maimon's criteria for analytic use-value. If our China-based curatorial colleagues' mindset is anything to go by, this is certainly the case for both the longstanding Aboriginal and non-indigenous work on environmental justice and land care, where today the most creative intersections occur. To call for a game-changing, 'strong national cultural narrative' in a globalised art-world over-determines indigenous art and forecloses broader reaching or interventionist art. Most environmental projects are best seen away from biennale circuitry altogether. Viewing protocols entrenched within the nationally-based, albeit globalised biennale or art fair circuit sit at odds with on-site work, and curators and critics are still wrestling with indigenous, extra mural, reclamation or field-naturalist style environmentalist art ventures.

These areas are characterised by a broad spectrum of practices that historically include representational politics (for instance David Stephenson's longstanding work on our landscape tradition, or gallery-based environmental installations by Mikala Dwyer, Fiona Foley, Janet Laurence or Ash Keating.) We are developing more inclusive critical frameworks for exhibitions that also work hard in political and legal arenas, such as the well-toured *Saltwater: Yirrkala: Bark Paintings of Sea Country* at Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre in 1999, part of the Yolngu's successful campaign for land and sea rights at Blue Mud Bay in N.E. Arnhem Land. Instrumental and aesthetic values are also unpredictably meshed in interventionist 'event management' projects (Squatspace's *Tours of Beauty* through Sydney's once-ghetto, now real estate inner suburbs, 2008-09; the Performance Space imaginative WALK program, or solo-projects such as Lucas Ihlein's green audit of the Museum of Contemporary Art—for its 2010 exhibition *In the Balance*—and Diego Bonetto's hilarious 'Weedy Connection' blog). These process-based, often collective and generally interventionist practices have long, intertwined indigenous and Western genealogies.¹⁷ For example, recent exhibitions by experienced curators make the point emphatically about environmental continuity in photography, such as Sandy Edwards' *The Challenged Landscape* (University of Technology Gallery, Sydney, 2010) and Judy Annear's *Photography and Place: Australian landscape photography 1970s until now* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2011). Much contemporary environmental art is self-consciously steeped in that historical, theological reverence for nature eulogised by John Ruskin, secularised in a modern and domestic vernacular through the Heidelberg School, and re-affirmed in the current intense, empirical scrutiny of nature. When John Wolseley lays down his paper and canvas to allow nature to scratch, rub, and brush burnt branches, grasses and foliage, he's extending the Western mimetic tradition, through an imaginary collaboration with nature. This is experienced as a dialogue that reveals moral truths, framed by a heightened visual perception of nature and deep understanding of natural phenomena linked with an imaginative response, akin to love, as Ruskin once put it.¹⁷ From the 1970s *Mildura Sculpturascapes* onward, artists have been renovating this Romantic creed of *natura naturans* (coined during the Middle Ages, meaning "nature naturing", or more loosely, "nature doing what nature does".) Related Aboriginal or pantheist ideas of Nature as an active force, with a will of its own, contrasts with the monotheist dualism of creation, and has generated decades of artwork that 'does' rather than simply 'is'.

Art historically, the idea of the country garden, orchard and bush clearing ('bush enchantment' as Fred McCubbin or Violet Teague would have called it), has also offered the sensual experience of belonging within a known place, a comforting image of humanised nature. Today this intimate space also hosts the permaculturalist, community gardener and relational art project. Contemporary expressions of local attachment and small-scaled, productive stewardship recall the intimate landscape tradition—as a longstanding art historical platform for environmental care and agricultural sustainability.

Food Forest, by the Artist as Family, is a parish garden hosted by St Michael's Church in the inner-eastern Sydney suburb of Surry Hills, in 2010. It was planted to supply food for the church's soup kitchen and to build local community spirit. Its mythic base in peasant culture promotes a fantasy continuum between an imaginary past and a hippie-permacultural present. It also claims ancestry in the English landscape garden tradition, expressing that dynamic and productive relation between art and nature, where nature aids art, and the artist/gardener aids the creation of future nature: a "shared good", as David Cooper describes.¹⁸ Ironically, I would argue that Aboriginal community gardens south of the so-called 'Rowley line' more successfully rework the intimate landscape tradition. For instance, at the Boolarng Nangamai art centre in the New South Wales coastal town of Gerringong, local native grasses are grown for community weaving/basketry workshops. The garden helps to filter a coastal stream in Gerringong's industrial hub, and forms part of a native reforestation seed-savers-and-propagation nursery. This art-garden venture successfully incorporates raw and value-added products and processes, extends knowledge of country across generations and cultures, strengthens family and community and maintains unbroken yet fragile cultural practices. Curatorial and critical work in this area will similarly change to keep

pace with the way environmental art has broadened over the last half-century. Artistic motifs such as bush tucker, groundwater, tidal patterns and rainfall are common, and art processes include direct seeding, hand-planting, feral pest control and water sampling.¹⁹ Many projects employ a postmodern textual or representational politics, while others opt for more contingent interventions and participatory modes. As the exhibition *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 2010) and its forerunners demonstrate (such as *Heat: Art and Climate Change* at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2008), environmental art may use customary markers of land law; a variety of disparate skills and procedures from scientific, economic and social science research; any combination of avant-garde or experimental art processes; remodel Western forms such as the sublime, picturesque or intimate landscape traditions, or a heady mix of any of the above. Clearly any *a priori* paradigm cannot account for the unpredictable ways these strategies of knowledge and action are bound together. From this list, you would think that our response to green art projects would splinter our critical vocabularies of use and form—but not necessarily.

It's simply a matter of productively considering the unpredictable relations between aesthetic and utilitarian values. This is also true of broader local art writing and curating. Unlike curators Chinnery, Moore and other international art marketeers, I suggest that local art itself is not the problem. Rather, art is currently being poorly served by curators and writers stuck in the predictable groove of provincialist frameworks. We do not need to assert a 'strong cultural narrative' of Australian art on the biennale circuit. Let's forget the Australian effect, respond to the more unpredictable interventions that contemporary art is making in the world, and change the game.

Notes

¹ With thanks to Jo Holder for her suggestions

² Alan Cruickshank, Colin Chinnery and Christopher Moore, 'Removed from the Dominant Culture', *Broadsheet* 39.4, 2010: 237

³ Colin Chinnery, *ibid*: 237

⁴ Christopher Moore, *ibid*: 238

⁵ These ideas permeate much of Smith's thought. See for instance his 1962 essay 'The Myth of Isolation', in *The Death of the Artist as Hero: Essays in History and Culture*, Melbourne: OUP, 1988: 217-229

⁶ Apologies to Bernard Smith's most entertaining and engaging 1945 history of Australia art, *Place, Taste and Tradition: a study of Australian art since 1788*, Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945

⁷ So Peter Beilharz sums up Robert Hughes founding assumption in *The Art of Australia*, in 'Robert Hughes and the Provincialism problem', in Peter Beilharz and Robert Manne eds, *Reflected light: La Trobe Essays*, 2006: 100

⁸ Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, Sept. 1974: 54-9

⁹ See Ian Burn, 'Art is what we do, culture is what we do to other artists' (1973), in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History*, Allen & Unwin, 1992: 131-139 and 'The Re-appropriation of Influence', in *From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c1940-1988, Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1988: 41-48; Charles Merewether, *Art and Social Commitment: an End to the City of Dreams 1931-1948*, Art Gallery NSW, and 'Introduction: Taking Place: Acts of Survival for a World to Come', *Zones of Contact, 2008 Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2008: 45-60; Ian Burn, Charles Merewether, Ann Stephen and Nigel Lendon, *The Necessity of Australian Art, An Essay on Interpretation*, Sydney: Power Publications, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1988

¹⁰ Christopher Moore, *op cit*: 238

¹¹ Colin Chinnery, *ibid*: 238

¹² Christopher Moore, *ibid*: 238

¹³ Adam Geczy, 'The Australia Effect', *Broadsheet* 39.4, 2010: 240

¹⁴ This may be partly what 'old guard' critical theorists writing for the art-politics journal *October* fear most about our neo-liberal art economy. See Hal Foster, 'Questionnaire on "the Contemporary"', *October* 130, 2009: 3-124

¹⁵ *ibid*: 77

¹⁶ Victor Margolin, 'Reflections on Art and Sustainability', in *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago and Independent Curators International, New York, 2006: 29

¹⁷ See Catriona Moore, 'Not Just A Pretty Picture: Art as Ecological Communication', *Water Wind Art and Debate: How environmental concerns impact on disciplinary research*, ed. Gavin Birch, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2007: 345-392

¹⁸ John Ruskin, 'That the Truth of Nature is Not to Be Discerned by the Uneducated Senses', *Modern Painters*, Vol 1, Andre Deutsch, 1987: 29, [1843]

¹⁹ David Cooper, 'A Philosophy of Gardens', OUP, 2006: 28, 39; cited in Ingrid Periz, "What Makes a garden?" (exhibition catalogue), *Janet Laurence, What can a garden be?*, Breenspace, Sydney, 2010

²⁰ Stephanie Radok and Gavin Malone, 'Remediation as Art', *Artlink* Vol 25 No 4, 2005: 47 and Gavin Malone, 'The Ecology of Art or Art as Ecology', *Broadsheet* Vol 27 No 7, Summer 1998: 5