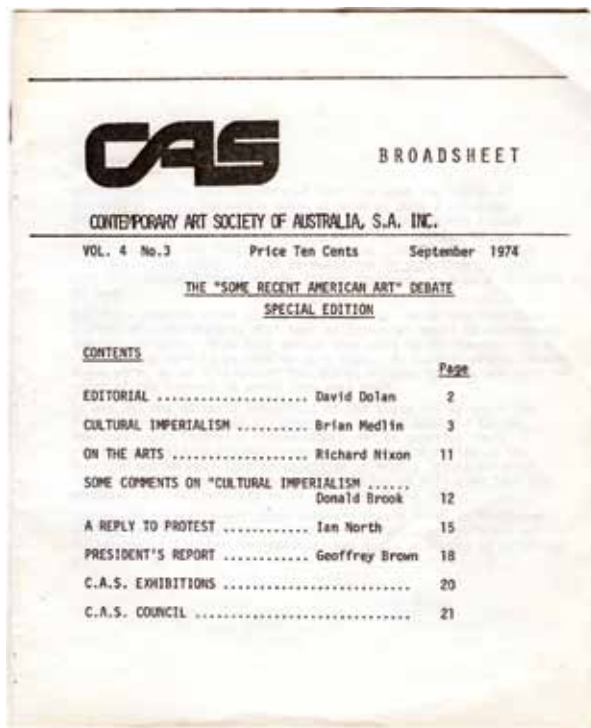


# CULTURAL IMPERIALISM REVISITED

THE BROADSHEET DEBATE OF 1974-75 AND ITS CONNECTIVITY WITH 'THE CONTEMPORARY'



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Following on from the *Broadsheet* 40.2 issue, 'The Australian Contemporary: Un Certain Regard' in June this year and the subsequent 'Broadsheet@40 Symposium' held in August to celebrate this publication's 40th anniversary—both of which contemplated 'The Contemporary' of Australia within the global artifact and intrigue of contemporary art and culture, this issue extends those meditations by reproducing what perseveres as a resonant and germane debate by several eminent domestic cultural commentators—published over three issues of *Broadsheet* from September 1974 to March 1975—on "Cultural Imperialism". The catalyst for this mannerly but heated discussion was the nationally touring exhibition *Some Recent American Art*, at which the Marxist-inclined anti-Vietnam War protestor and Flinders University Professor of Philosophy Brian Medlin became acutely agitated enough to write to the then Contemporary Art Society of SA's (folded foolscap, mimeographed) *Broadsheet* magazine (priced at 10 cents each!). At that time the domestic politics of Australia, the USA and Europe were no less turbulent and intellectually if not morally bereft than now; the Vietnam War was in its final death throes, OPEC implemented its oil embargo against the USA, and the Middle East and Cold War Europe were consumed by terrorism and border conflicts, the aggregate of which mirrors 'the contemporary' of global instability. Medlin's outburst was counter-attacked by fellow Flinders University Professor Donald Brook, with Ian North, then Curator of Paintings at the Art Gallery of SA (which presented *Some Recent American Art*), mediating.

As a precursor to (as publisher) the Contemporary Art Centre of SA's 70th anniversary in 2012, and in the spirit of the cultural imperialism debate, this issue has commissioned reflections upon that discussion and time by surviving protagonists Donald Brook and Ian North, contextualised by the visiting exhibition *Saatchi Gallery in Adelaide: British Art Now*, held at the Art Gallery of SA, 30 July-23 October, 2011, which according to its publicity was "the largest exhibition of British contemporary art shown in over a decade in... an Australian-exclusive survey, straight from London's internationally acclaimed Saatchi Gallery... The high profile Saatchi Gallery has been arguably the biggest influence on contemporary British art during the past twenty-five years and has spectacularly succeeded in its aim to bring contemporary art to the widest audience possible".

The Australian arts critic Christopher Allen, in his review 'Mass Appeal' (8 October, 2011) presented another perspective on cultural imperialism with a different designation, of "what an adman thinks art is... since the culture of advertising and media has become pervasive in contemporary consumer society it unfortunately corresponds to what a lot of ordinary people, too, have come to expect of art." Allen continued, "The logic of consumer society reduces everything to the status of products distinguished according to the principles of market segmentation and price points... Mass products are marketed to stress value for money. Luxury products are promoted to emphasise the quality and rarity of the primary materials employed and the expertise, craft and tradition that go into their making. Because art is considered as another category of consumer product, but one that exists on an even higher level than ordinary luxury products, it has to be differentiated from this category; and the obvious way to do that is to claim it has transcended skill and craft, flaunting the cheapness of its materials and a contempt for execution."

In Ian North's 'Cultural Imperialism Revisited', *Broadsheet* Vol 5 No 1 (1975), he expanded his interpositioning in an accompanying footnote, "I take the most important sense of the phrase "cultural imperialism", and the sense in which Professor Medlin is most interested, as the export and promotion of cultural materials for the advancement of political and financial interests." The narrative if not mythos surrounding the YBA's is well known, as is the cult of Saatchi and his involvement in their subsequent art market ubiquity. Kate Bush in her 2004 *Artforum* text (June: 91), 'Young British art: the YBA sensation', referred to their "shock tactics" and disposition "both oppositional and entrepreneurial", perfect stuff for an ad man, a "master of manipulation" and a collector who, according to *Forbes Magazine*, refers to his collection as "stock". *Saatchi Gallery in Adelaide: British Art Now*, unlike *Some Recent American Art*, only appeared in Adelaide and failed to cause a ripple of public sensation (indeed, Christopher Allen's bagging of the exhibition increased audiences), despite exhibition 'curator' Mike Rann's opening night jokey-blokey exhortations, as departing State Premier and Arts Minister and instigator/financier of this exhibition's visitation, about Tracey Emin's bed.

Opposite: Spartacus Chetwynd, *The Lizard*, 2004

Below: Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998

Photos courtesy the artists and Saatchi Gallery, London

Above: *Broadsheet* magazine as it was, 1974





## BRIAN MEDLIN

'CULTURAL IMPERIALISM', *Broadsheet* Vol 4 No 3, 1974

I:

U.S. cultural domination of Australia and of the whole non-socialist world is an obvious fact. It is so obvious that it seems to need no comment. The trouble is that it is too obvious to be noticed. It shapes all our perceptions without being perceived itself—in much the same way as the air we breathe carries sound. We all know that. Yet the foreign devils capture every impulse we have to fight them and turn it to their own advantage. Nice Mike Willesie tells us daily that U.S. exploitation of our oil resources by Esso makes us more independent. He tells our children that offshore oil is an ecological boon.

By now America influence is so deep in our bones that we have to walk away from our own skeletons to stand up to it. It has built into us these self-evident and crippling falsehoods:

1. That every man is an island. No message in any bottle will ever cross the seas to another human being.

And hence with impeccable logic,

2. That our role in life is to kiss the boss' gilded bronze for the odd bob so that we may continue to eat, drink and be mindlessly merry, while he continues to hire and fire, to organise coups and drop napalm.

3. That the race is to the swift. The point is to succeed, to win the fine-boned ladies and the sleek cars, to own more and waste more than anyone else on earth. Those who succeed deserve success and the failures only have themselves to blame.

4. That in spite of 1, 2 and 3, humankind is one big happy family of rich and poor, fat and skinny, men and women, white and black. The class struggle is a myth, sexism is a female fantasy, capital serves labour, napalm is love the aerials at North West Cape are really maypoles and Sam's your Uncle. As long as the little local devils of our public media live by advertising they are in the service of the big foreign devils. And being in that service they will lie and lie and lie for themselves and their masters. News items and editorials, telly plays and commercials, will feed us on the four falsehoods night and day forever. "Popular" culture then is no threat to U.S. Corporate Capitalism. Meanwhile the fact stands that, from an initial investment of \$2 million, GMH has exported over \$400 million in profits to the United States and that these profits are the stolen labour of Australian workers.

II:

What about posh culture? Not so long ago there were painters in this country who had the nerve to paint as though Australia actually existed. But now look at *Blue Poles*. Last year the Australian Government bought *Blue Poles*, a pleasant piece of fashionable ephemera purportedly by Jackson Pollock. Don't think the \$US2 million our Government paid for it was the market price. No, by astuteness and cunning, they managed to snap up *Blue Poles* for eight hundred thousand dollars more than the market price.

At least two people deserve a large part of the credit for securing this anti-bargain. One is Mr. James Mollison, Director of the Australian National Gallery, Canberra, and a member of the acquisitions committee for that gallery. Another is Mr. Max Hutchinson, New York representative of Sydney's Gallery A. Before Mr. Mollison was appointed to the Canberra Gallery (an event which caused the resignation of the entire gallery committee) he worked for Gallery A.

Mr. Hutchinson, the founder of Gallery A, was his boss. Mr. Mollison has been a great defender of *Blue Poles* which he calls a "monument"—a monument that may well fall to bits because of Pollock's slap-dash techniques and his use of cheap commercial paints. Mr. Hutchinson received a commission of \$US100,000 for his part in the transaction. The Australian Government was too shrewd to allow this to be paid by the vendor in the usual clumsy way. Mr. Hutchinson's commission was paid by the buyer—that is, it came out of our taxes. As Australian taxpayers we should record our gratitude to the Australian Government, to Mr. Hutchinson, to Mr. Mollison and to everyone else concerned for ensuring that for once Philistinism was defeated, that these sums were not irresponsibly squandered to the benefit of the Australian people.

Look also at *Some Recent American Art*. The exhibition of this name has been touring Australia and was in Adelaide throughout June. It contains such significant works of art as: (1) a row of bricks 29 feet long (2) colour fluorescent tubes (pretty ones too) 67 1/4" from the floor (3) enlarged Photostat copies of dictionary definitions of such words as "visualisation". With the exception of some of the high inaccessible videotapes, it contains only one exhibit that comments in any way on American society. That one exhibit doesn't penetrate our pleasure in the other works. (And indeed, some of them are pleasant.) It was sent to us by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Nelson Rockefeller is a trustee of the Museum and its dominating influence. Assistance was also provided by Mr. and Mrs. J Heinz II. The exhibition cost \$100,000 to mount, though we don't know who paid much of that sum.

The Rockefeller Group alone operates as least one hundred and seven companies and fourteen subsidiaries in Australia. These include Esso Standard Oil (Aust.) Ltd., Amoco Holdings Pty. Ltd., Uniroyal Holdings Ltd. The known assets of these companies in Australia amount to \$1770.9 million. At least fifty-two of them are wholly American owned. In eighty-three of them U.S. holdings range from 50-100%. While American holdings fall below 33% in only nine companies, they exceed 66% in fifty-eight companies. The Rockefeller interest in Australian culture is unlikely to be disinterested.

Mr. and Mrs. J Heinz II are associated with the Mellon group. This group operates at least fourteen companies and five subsidiaries in Australia. These include Westinghouse Electric and Alcoa of Australia Ltd. The known assets of these companies in Australia amount to \$397.0 million. At least even of them are wholly American owned. Four are 50% American owned, one 51%, three 67% and one 74% American owned. H.J. Heinz Co. of Aust. Ltd., is wholly American owned with assets of \$20 million. Mr. and Mrs. J Heinz II cannot be regarded as disinterested in their sponsorship of exhibitions in this country.

Perhaps though, the Sydney critics who praised the exhibition were disinterested. Sandra McGrath (*The Australian*) said it was "a unique visual experience and one that should not be missed on any account". With a straight face she quoted the organiser of the exhibition, Jennifer Licht, as saying that "the artists... represent the most interesting intellectual advancements in art history to date". Sandra McGrath happens to be an American. She also happens to be a member of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, N.Y., which happened to promote the show. It also happened that membership of the International Council is open only to those rich enough to buy their way in.

Daniel Thomas (*Sydney Morning Herald*) hailed the show as "the most recent outbreak of pure art, art as art, art for art's sake, art as concrete fact, forms, ideas which have value in their own right, regardless on their use and regardless of their maker". Daniel Thomas happens to be art critic for the Fairfax *Sydney Morning Herald*. James Fairfax happens to be yet another member of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. Ignoring Mr. Thomas' high falutin language, his judgement boils down to this: this exhibition has nothing important to say about anything to anyone. That is precisely why Mr. Thomas praises it. This is precisely its value to corporate capitalism. The artists agree with Mr. Thomas about the emptiness of their work. Most of them use language just as pretentious as his. Here are some of their comments from the catalogue:

*The models for art are in art.* (Mel Bouchner)

*I would like the work to be non-work... As a thing it accedes to its non-logical self. It is something. It is nothing.* (Eva Hesse)

*The art act is a tool for extended consciousness. It has no other responsibilities; it can't have and still function. This is its strength. To deal with it as "myth" or belabor it with questions like "what does it mean?" is short-sighted. My art has never been about ideas.* (Robert Irwin)

*I couldn't begin to think about the order of the universe or the nature of American society.* (Don Judd)

Construct an investigation of drawing based on information contained within the paper and not on any other information. (Dorothea Rockburne)

There is an image; the image is the paint, the procedure, the brush, the way the painting is one; this actually is the image. (Robert Ryman)

The artist is the necromancer, the priest; he does not make something interesting he makes some thing, a fact, a painting, Art. (Brice Marden)

An artist cannot and does not prepare for a certain response. He does not consider the response but simply follows his inspiration. (Agnes Martin)

Clearly artists who think this way are going to be much less dangerous to the Nelson Rockefellers and J. Heinz IIs of this world than would be artists who think like another American, Meredith Tax: "In our time, to refrain from mentioning genocide, racism, cultural schizophrenia, sexual exploitation, and the systematic starvation of entire populations is itself a political act—an action of censorship of cowardice" ("Culture is not Neutral, Whom Does it Serve?" in *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, Pelican books edited by Lee Baxandall.) Today United States imperialism, generated by U.S. corporate capitalism, is the principal enemy of the world's peoples. Even to mention genocide, racism, cultural schizophrenia, sexual exploitation, and the systematic starvation of entire populations, is to indict U.S. corporate capitalism from which they are inseparable. To mention these things is to indict Nelson Rockefeller and Mr. and Mrs. J Heinz II.

It is thus not surprising that certain sections of U.S. corporate capitalism should be promoting in the U.S. and Australia an art that has nothing to say. Big A artists, in capitalist society, are not usually so directly under the control of the ruling class as commercial artists are. Given the nature of patronage, they can be relied on pretty well, but not entirely. There is always the danger that certain aspects of their work will be antagonistic to the ruling class. The great nineteenth-century European novelists provide the best example of this.

The most economical solution to this problem is to use patronage and art promotion to select and generate amongst artists and their audience the right kind of philosophy. This internalises the required control. The right kind of philosophy must direct artists away from human-kind towards ART—it must make visual art, for example, *purely* visual. It must restrict the audience to people unlikely to revolt against the established "order". Even within this audience it must confirm subservience and corrupt the will to revolt.

So we find the aesthetic underlying both the art produced and the criticism that welcomes it to be a confused individualism scrambled together out of nihilism, elitism and hedonism. No other philosophy will do the job. No other philosophy can tolerate the world created by corporate capitalism. *Nihilism* is necessary: any regard for human values will be outraged by that world and contemptuous of an art which scrupulously ignores it. *Elitism* is necessary: without believing that we are in some way special, we would be dispelled by expensive provisions for our own tastes. *Hedonism* is necessary: without the conviction that *only* pleasure is valuable and that pleasure is *always* valuable, we would not tolerate work that offers at most *nothing but* pleasure.

This philosophy doesn't have to be sensible or even consistent: for the most part, artists and critics are neither builder labourers nor logicians. All that is required from it is an art that is entirely vacuous and utterly unpopular. Given the resources of the corporation men, they can easily find flunkies to produce and peddle such an art.

This is not to say that there is a conscious and explicit conspiracy involved over either *Some Recent American Art* or *Blue Poles*. The whole point of "mind-forged manacles" is to do away with the need for anything so crude. Only a fool would suggest that Nelson Rockefeller, for instance, has a hot-line to Mr. Thomas, and dictates his crits over it. On the other hand, only a fool would believe that Mr. Thomas could hold down his job with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, if he shared the sympathies of this article. Certainly Donald Brook, an honest liberal,

couldn't hold down the job. He was sacked and replaced by Mr. Thomas, a more accommodating critic. We don't need to suppose that either that Mr. Thomas, for instance, see himself as a servant of the foreign devils. How Mr. Thomas sees himself of this matter is unknown to us, of no interest to us, and unlikely to be much influenced by what he is.

At the instigation of the C.A.S. (Contemporary Art Society), the S.A. National Gallery recently held a public forum to discuss *Some Recent American Art*. The debate went easily to the patriotic progressives — whom Ivor Francis, in his befuddlement, described as "reactionaries", (*The Advertiser*, 30.6.74). Speaker after speaker condemned the exhibition for the kind of reasons advanced in this article. A Chrysler worker vigorously and correctly wrote off the exhibition as "a load of garbage". There were a few explicit supporters. The most able defence involved the claim that the exhibition has to be understood in a complex art-historical contest, against the background of minimalist theory, and as concerned to comment on modes of communication. Against this: (1) An art that *has* to be understood in a complex art-historical context, from which most people are excluded, is certainly elitist. (2) Minimalism is a hotchpotch of logical solecisms and is certainly a nihilist doctrine. (3) As a matter of logic, a kind of communication that is only about its own mode of communication can communicate nothing about anything (including itself).

The day after the forum a group of anti-imperialist artists picketed the National Gallery under such slogans as "Art for Whom?", "Art for the people, not profit", and "Resist Cultural Imperialism".

Daniel Thomas will eventually score his British knighthood for services to U.S. imperialism. On 1 August in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he attacked the progressive Adelaide artists under the contradictory headline "Adelaide's unjustified anti-Americanism". "All art", he said, "is by and for people". True. But which people? *The* people or their enemies? The art to which Mr. Thomas is committed is directly by and for an effete, disengaged elite. Indirectly it serves American corporate capitalism. Mr. Thomas talks of "fine perceptions of small things". What we want is a correct world view. For that fine perceptions are necessary. Yet we cannot magic up a correct world view by self-indulgently refining our perceptions of the vacuous.

Even the refinement involved is dubious. I assure Mr. Thomas, who seems not to know, that most other people can notice as well as himself that pencil-lines in a picture vary in thickness. This can be detected by quite coarse perceptions. They don't, as Mr. Thomas seems to do, pride themselves on this accomplishment. They don't think it makes them out as special and precious to civilisation. They regard it as trivial in the life of an activated human being. To see trivia as important is to see them wrongly. It leads naturally to the view that there is something important about *ourselves*, that unlike others, we are gifted with *fine perceptions*. Without a correct world view even our finest perceptions will involve *misperceptions*.

Those of us who oppose U.S. imperialism and do not despair in the face of its apparent strength have a different philosophy from bourgeois individualism, American-style. We reject the nihilism, hedonism and elitism underlying *Some Recent American Art*. We demand a different art. We demand a robust popular art that speaks from and to the real concerns of the world's men and women. We reject an art that does not serve the people. We do not reject pleasure, but we reject sterile pleasure. We reject self-indulgence and self-admiration. We reject pleasure that confirms the "cultivated in their elitism and hence in their enmity to the mass of human beings. We do not require for acceptability that a picture must show Marshall Green devouring human flesh while Mr. Thomas waits upon him. Yet we recognise that the most important pleasure to be derived from art is that of correctly understanding the world and that a correct understanding of the world must result in determined struggle against U.S. imperialism.

To serve the people of Australia and the peoples of the world, rather than a handful of art buffs and Nelson Rockefeller, art must be involved in that struggle. It need not be involved directly, nor even consciously, but involved it must be. For that struggle is no less than the struggle for survival, for human culture, for human kind.



## DONALD BROOK

'SOME COMMENTS ON 'CULTURAL IMPERIALISM'', *Broadsheet* Vol 4 No 3, 1974

There is so much of the importance to agree with in what Brian Medlin has to say about recent art and contemporary society that it may appear only mischievous to draw attention to minor errors of omission and commission, and to occasional guile in the form of argument. He should, of course, have listed Anna Lewis (of Gallery A and Concrete Constructions) among the wealthy Australians who have bought their way on to the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. He should not have said that the recent public forum on the American show at which "speaker after speaker condemned the exhibition" was called "at the instigation of the C.A.S.". No doubt it *should* have been called at the instigation of the C.A.S.; and it might have been counted generous of Professor Medlin to credit the Society with so much spontaneous initiative. But the C.A.S. was undoubtedly prompted, by those concerned individuals who also arranged for "speaker after speaker" to contribute adverse comment on the exhibition.

I am commenting unhappily on the form of the report, not on the fact that this occasion was set up and stacked by an interest group. Most public occasions are set up and stacked by an interest group, often more subtly, and it is right not to let the Establishment monopolise the trick. But it would be better not to play tricks at all—not even much small rhetorical tricks as to notice that "A Chrysler worker" wrote off the exhibition as "a load of garbage" without observing that so too would most of Chrysler's directors and senior management—although I concede that none of the philistines on the other side of the class war was interested enough to come and say so. Professor Medlin sees himself as involved in an ideological battle in which victory is too important to be put even notionally in jeopardy by the exercise of honest liberal scruples.

But he is not alone, as it happens, in believing that we are in "a struggle for survival, for human culture, for human kind"; nor is he alone in believing that art should play an important role in that process. I believe it, too. The question is, what role?

I think it is clear from his paper (and from many other indications) that one phrase summarises the role of art in his scheme of things, at least to a first main approximation. The role of art is to assist people in "correctly understanding the world". The role of philosophy, it is well known, is not to understand the world but to change it, and the order of status and priorities is clear: philosophy will determine directions and goals, while art will serve as an instrument for their attainment. "We demand a robust popular art that speaks from and to the real concerns of the world's men and women", he writes. Now these *real* concerns are obviously not the *actual* concerns of the world's men and women, but rather those concerns that people would display if they were not bound, or blinded, by an "incorrect" world view (which is to say, in practice, any world view significantly different from Professor Medlin's).

This attitude seems to me to be quite proper in relation to the *criticism* of art (for how else would a serious critic function?) but quite wrong in relation to the production of art. To condemn some current art because it is not robust, or not popular, or not politically effective, is no more objectionable in principle than to praise the same work because it is novel or rare or delightful. The question of what is relevant in art criticism is very much an open question, and I agree with Professor Medlin that ideology is relevant. But the view of art as a political or social instrument has implications for the artist, as well as for the critic, that are not acceptable. If his art were conceived in this way the artist would be committed to making works that (protectively) served his own previously formed (and hopefully "correct") world view. Both the temporal and the logical priorities would place ideology first, art second.

Now the objectionable thing about this account of the matter is that it leaves no room for art to serve human kind (as, at its best, it does serve human kind) by prompting innovation, or at least modification, in our world view. Art is a main source of invention because it models our future possibilities—it serves to put up fresh options for our consideration. The choice that we make will inevitably be steered by ideological constraints, but it will still be a choice determined by our aspirations for

the future as well as by causes in the past. It may, indeed, be a radical choice, as when the first works of art (sometimes put in terms of theories of natural philosophy) offered us the option of seeing animals, including people, as machines. Artist-inventors who had been wholly dominated by the earlier religious or vitalist world view, could not even have put up such a model for consideration. As it was, criticism was fierce and acceptance of the model is still not universal.

So it seems to me that while a critic is entitled to prefer "a robust popular art that speaks from and to the real concerns of the world's man and women" (filling in 'real' to taste) this should not be a strict directive given to the artist. He or she should be free to put up models of that sort, or of any sort—and to have them subjected to criticism. To suppose that we have no more need of free imaginative invention such as it supplied conspicuously through the best of the art is to suppose that we are already in possession of the definitive truth about the world, and only need to ensure its promulgation. Of course art is an instrument, as Brian Medlin points out; and of course it is the proper object of ideological appraisal. But is it not *only* an instrument. It is also a main source of invention for those objects and processes for which instruments have to be devised. Art is before philosophy, as well as behind.

## BRIAN MEDLIN

REPLY:

I am surprised and pretty disturbed to find Donald Brook's name on a piece like this. I am also surprised to find such an unfriendly piece from someone who claims to be in large agreement with me. I think Donald should ask himself very seriously which of us is the one concerned with victory at the expense of "honest liberal scruples" and whether his own concern for a mere personal victory has not betrayed him into being mischievous after all. I shall offer a detailed reply to the next issue of *Broadsheet*.

## IAN NORTH

'SOME RECENT AMERICAN ART': A Reply to Protest, *Broadsheet* Vol 4 No 3, 1974

What follows is the (slightly expanded) first draft of my necessarily shorter and more simplistic column for the *News* (27/6/74) discussing the public forum held at the Art Gallery of South Australia on Monday 24 June. If this version takes the matter a little further than the *News* article, then the topic certainly still demands far more time and attention than I can afford, raising as it does the most fundamental issues concerning the nature of art and its role in society. But the local protestors have yet to give any public sign that they recognise the complexity of these issues. If nothing else, perhaps these comments will elicit from elsewhere a deeper, lengthier contribution to the discussion than has so far been apparent.

Among the main criticisms voiced at the forum were that the art was hedonistic, nihilistic and elitist, the last charge being leveled also at the manner of the exhibition's presentation. The first two generalisations can be readily disposed of by an unblinkered examination of the art itself. To see Vito Acconci's tapes as hedonistic, or Dan Flavin's fluorescent tubes as nihilistic, for example, is simply bizarre. The third accusation could probably bear more examination, but it must be stated outright that the use of the word "elitist" in this context is for the most part an abuse of the language.

The art is *specialist*, perhaps, but on the whole it is doubtful whether it is any more designed to appeal to particular social class than, say, a scientific paper on the analysis of moon-rock samples. (Of course, capitalism ensures that valued objects have high price tags; but there are easier ways of making money than making minimal art. Not so incidentally, it might also be pointed out that many of the artists represented in the show are more decidedly left of centre politically—Andre, for instance, is a Maoist). The operative and quite absurd presumption behind the "elitist" charge here appeared to be that all of the manifestations of any human endeavour should be instantly apparent to all comers.



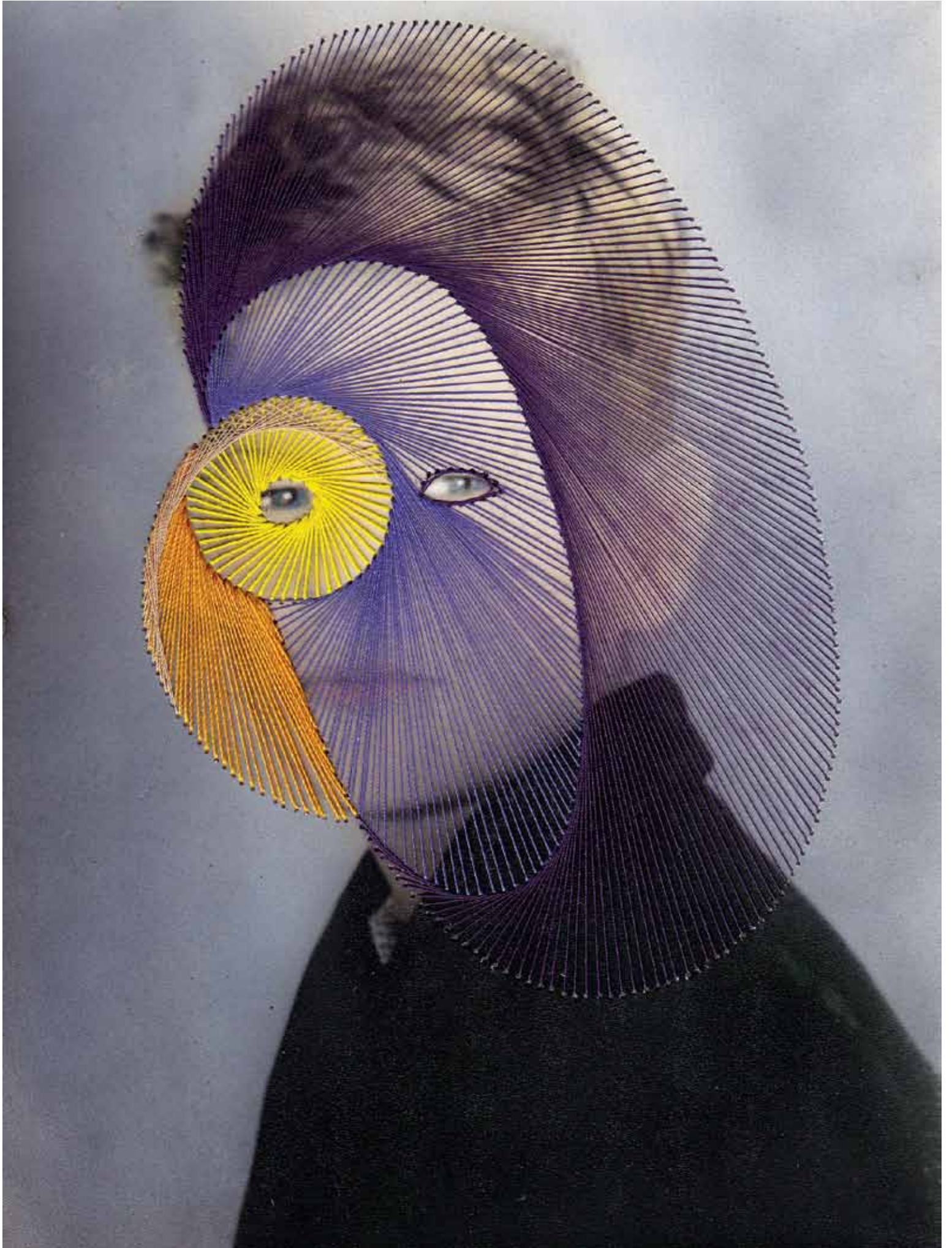
The use of the word “elitist” to describe the presentation of the of the exhibition was just as extraordinary: the show, after all was open to any member of the public, free of charge; all works were labeled; free information sheets, literature and guided tours were available; and an illustrated catalogue (a book of 94 pages) was on sale at the price of a cinema seat. The show, then, was physically accessible to anyone, and a considerable effort was made to make it intellectually accessible as well.

But perhaps the most important charge was that the art did not address itself explicitly and constructively to the urgent ecological, social and political problems facing mankind. This is largely justified as an observation if not an accusation, even though it is sometimes (rather unconvincingly) claimed that the nature, if not necessarily the content, of non-object art is antipathetic to capitalism. But the allied accusation, that minimal and post-object art is promoted by capitalists as an opium of the people, is, generally, highly implausible—indeed it is hard to imagine a more Quixotic way of attempting to blind people to the realities of their existence. Most people—like nearly all of the industrial and political leaders from Washington to Peking who dominate them—seek only a reassuring line of realism in their art. Art, and especially advanced art, is on the very periphery of the world of power, influence and politics, where it was pushed during the nineteenth-century by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, amount other factors.

For this reason, incidentally, it is difficult to see why anyone concerned about the state of the world would bother to waste time protesting about advanced art—unless, as seemed to be the case with similar protests in New York during 1970, the protest is just one more move in the art game.

It is a cliché that exceptions can usually be found to prove a rule, and, for example, it might be that some of the wealthy backers of MOMA see exhibitions abroad as part of a program of economic imperialism. But even if this were so, one would almost certainly be wrong in imagining that the contribution of art to this type of exploitation was of major importance—and that the ‘exploitation’ need be all one way. It would be as foolish to underestimate the staff of MOMA—who are highly skilled at using capitalist money to bring what they consider to be significant art before the widest possible public—as it was misguided of the anonymous “group of concerned artists” in the first of their recently issued pamphlets to gratuitously attack Australian critics Sandra McGrath and Daniel Thomas, falsely implying that they were imperialist lackeys incapable of expressing independent judgments.

But the main point to be made here is that art, surely, need not frontally attack the world’s problems to be worthy of consideration. Alternatives are, on the one hand, to regard ‘apolitical’ advanced art as a luxury to be shelved until times are more propitious; or, on the other, to insist that advanced art (along with every other human activity, to be consistent) be turned, somehow, to solving those problems. Both are unrealistic; and it is unlikely that either, if applied, would make significant difference to the world. It is perfectly legitimate and doubtlessly commendable to suggest and support an art which draws attention to social and other ills. But art such as that in the American show expands awareness in various ways, and it would be totalitarian to deny the possibilities of experience and behaviour it explores: that these are by no means destructive of political awareness is evidenced, for example, by the clear-eyed statements of Richard Serra in metal and video.



## BRIAN MEDLIN

A REPLY TO DONALD BROOK (HIS 'SOME COMMENTS ON CULTURAL IMPERIALISM', *Broadsheet* Vol 4 No 4, 1974

I.

I am not sure how much or how importantly Donald and I disagree. I do not want to complain that he has simply ignored the main contentions and arguments of my original article. Instead of dealing with them he has gone in for mere speculation about my views on the relation between philosophy and art. He has supported this speculation with what he would call "rhetorical tricks".

One of these tricks is particularly interesting. He says that an incorrect worldview is "in practice any world view significantly different from Professor Medlin's". The idea that firm belief amounts to bigotry and that determined action amounts to fanaticism is one that has obvious advantages for those firm believers and determined actors who control our lives. It is widespread amongst liberals. Donald Brook, whose behaviour is often incompatible with it, seems infected by it. "It would be better not to play tricks at all" he says, in a context which equates trickery with ordinary political action. Well, I for one cannot accept that the only way to keep your hands clean is to cut them off.

II.

On the one hand, Mr. Brook seems to suggest that I ignore people's actual concerns (which I do not). On the other hand he seems to suggest that I ignore the imagination (which I do not). "Art", he says "is a main source of invention because it models future possibilities". That is true of art because it is true of thought. Art discovers and obscures the world as well as philosophy. To find this out we have to have a bash. We have to canvass possibilities. Art is one important area where this happens. To canvass possibilities usefully we have to be adventurous.

Yet for all that there are possibilities *and* possibilities, just as there is vision and fantasy. Vision is the serious investigation of *real* possibilities, states of affairs which might well exist or be brought about in the real world. Fantasy is the construction and contemplation of *mere* possibilities regardless of their relation to actual states of affairs. The classless society exists nowhere in the world. It is a visionary notion, not a fantasy because there is a significant possibility that it can be achieved or approached out of things as they actually are. By contrast, hell, the sugar candy mountain and the capitalist welfare states are products of fantasy—though at least two of them were offered as visions. I don't want to deplore fantasy, only to recognise it for what it is. The quest for vision will immediately produce many fantasies. I don't want to deplore *deliberate* fantasising either. Idle dreams are probably as necessary to human life as oxygen.

I do want to deplore passing off fantasy as vision as well as passing off as vision what is neither visionary nor fantastic but merely trivial and boring. I want to deplore the obliteration of the distinction between vision and fantasy. And I want to deplore the life of fantasy, the use of fantasy to replace reality.

The job of art is not merely to model possibilities. It is also to distinguish between possibilities, to illuminate the difference between the visionary and the merely fantastic. This involves us in distinguishing between the actual and the possible and relating the two. (I don't maintain that this is the *only* job of art).

This isn't a call for superhuman perfection. Of course the jobs of art are hard and will usually be done fairly messily. Thinking is hard and characteristically involves mistake and omissions. Nor is it a call for a simple-minded clarity: nothing said here should suggest that each work of art must contain its own particular neat verbally translatable message. (The whole relation between vision and fantasy is much more complex than I have so far suggested. One, and anyone, of the complicating factor is the symbolic use of the products of fantasy for vibrancy purposes).

But it does mean that artists can be criticised because their work is obscure, needlessly ambiguous or just plain wrong. In particular it means they can be criticised for lack of vision, for depicting the world as it is on the surface without attempting to understand its inner workings and without attempting to show what the world could be. They can be criticised

for false vision, for passing off fantasy as vision. They can be criticised for encouraging us to live a life of fantasy, burying out actual concerns under a mountain of dreams. As part of all this, they can be criticised for failing to recognise the difference between vision and fantasy or for marking the difference in the wrong place.

III.

Donald Brook's remarks on the relation between criticism and art puzzle me. I hope that he will enlarge on them in reply. How can it be the case that it is legitimate to make ideological criticism of art but not to make ideological demands on artists? To claim that an artist's artwork fails by certain ideological criteria is to complain that the artist has failed to employ those criteria in his work. If we say that the poetry of W.B. Yeats is reactionary, that his vision was largely fantasy, that in any case he made no clear distinction in practice between the two, and if we deplore these qualities, we are engaging in adverse ideological criticism. It doesn't follow that the world would be a better place without his poetry (though that is arguable). It does seem to follow that it would have been a better place if Yeat's poetry hadn't had these defects. In pointing them out a critic would surely be interested in eliminating similar defects from future poetry. A degree of success in eliminating them would amount to just this: that ideological requirements advanced by the critic had been accepted by at least one poet. To deplore work for ideological reasons cannot be split off from deploring the worker for his ideology. It can be split off from clogging his mouth with clay and burning his books, but that's another matter.

IV.

I suspect that Mr. Brook mistakes the issue between us. He seems to think that what is at issue is the imaginative freedom of the artist. "To support that we have no more need of free imaginative invention such as is supplied conspicuously through the best of the arts is to suppose that we are already in possession of the definitive truth about the nature of mankind and womankind, and about the world, and only need to ensure its promulgation." Here I believe he is quite wrong. The point is not that we are to work out a correct world view by "philosophy", that this world view is to remain untouched for all time, and that henceforth all art shall be practised within its confines. Who said that? Not I.

First, art is itself a means of investigation. It can and should modify our philosophy just as our philosophy can and should modify art. Second, a correct world view will not be absolutely correct. It will only be more correct than its current rivals. It will not be free from factual error. It will contain inconsistencies. It will be incomplete. As essential feature of any correct worldview is that it should recognise that it too is a developing part of the world like anything else in the world. A correct world view will acknowledge that it is conditioned by the experience that produced it and limited by that experience. Accordingly, it will contain provisions for reappraising itself. (All these, by the way, are integral features of Marxism). Third, it doesn't follow from any of this that the only proper attitude to the important questions and problems in life is an agnostic quietism. Nor does it follow that it is wrong to criticise harshly certain artists and critics for the role they play in supporting corporate capitalism—especially since the complaint against them is partly that they have simply turned away from modeling future possibilities. Fourth, everyone has a world view of some art, however unsystematic and confused it may be. Fifth, any world view will constrain the imagination in some ways and liberate it in others. According to some world views, the distinction between vision and fantasy will not exist. Different world views will make the distinction in different places. Some world views will tend to generate certain kinds of vision and fantasy, other will tend to suppress them. An artist is never just imaginatively *free* in some absolute sense. The question always is Free from what, Constrained by what? Valuable art is often produced out of world views containing ludicrous components. There is no simple relation between world views and art so that the more correct world views inevitably produce the most valuable art. Nonetheless, the more correct an artist's world view the more acceptable will be the imaginative freedom it allows. And the more acceptable will be the restraints it imposes. The less correct an artist's world view the most objectionable will be that freedom *and those restraints*.

## DONALD BROOK

FURTHER TO BRIAN MEDLIN'S 'A REPLY TO DONALD BOOK',  
*Broadsheet*, Vol 5 No 1, 1975

A difficulty about sustaining, over months, a discussion like this, is to preserve a lively and accurate sense of what it is all about. Few readers will carry the details of the argument in their memories from issue to issue of *Broadsheet*, and perhaps even fewer will have the patience always to refer back before reading on. Nor will conscientious back-reference always help, when the discussion develops of guerilla character rather than that of an artillery duel from fixed positions. There is no score for a direct hit on a vacated trench. Just the same, some recapitulation will be necessary, even allowing for the mobility of targets. In his last article, Professor Medlin agrees with me that art involves imagination, in the modeling of possibilities (*Broadsheet*, December 1974: 6). He introduces a distinction between vision (the artistic canvassing of real possibilities) and fantasy (the construction and contemplation of 'mere' possibilities regardless of their relation to the actual state of affairs). He offers as examples the classless society (a vision) and hell, the sugar-candy mountain and the capitalist welfare state (all mere fantasies).

One might expect him, having drawn this distinction, to follow it through to some direct conclusion of relevance to art: for example, to argue that artists ought to concern themselves only with vision, and not at all with fantasy. Had he done this, one difference between his position and mine would have been clarified, for I do not wish to impose any such rule upon artists. I think it proper for critics to apply criteria of this sort to artists' works, but I do not think that the complex and elusive distinction between vision and fantasy is one that artists must always operate for themselves, while they are generating art. I do not, of course, think it culpable of an artist to do so, but neither do I think it culpable of an artist not to do so. However, more of this in a moment. The important point about this phase of the discussion is that Professor Medlin confounds expectation and does not, in fact, use the vision/fantasy distinction to develop a definite prescription for artists, and thereby mark out a clear difference between our opinions. On the contrary, he seems rather to take my own view, after apparently setting out to differ. He writes: "I don't want to deplore fantasy, only to recognise it for what it is... I don't want to deplore deliberate fantasising either... I do want to deplore passing off fantasy as vision..." (: 7). In other words (so it seems to me) Professor Medlin is distinguishing, much as I do myself, between the artistic function and the critical function. The former he seems to be conceiving (in my view correctly) as primarily generative of options, and the latter as primarily selective between options.

But then he retracts, or at least equivocates, so that the terrain of agreement that had been so attractively revealed is suddenly fogged again. "The job of art", he goes on, "is not merely to model possibilities. It is also to distinguish between possibilities, to illuminate the difference between the visionary and the merely fantastic." It is the phrase "the job of art" that equivocates so dangerously. Does "the job of art" mean 'the artists' job' or 'the critics' job'? Is it the generative or the selective function that is seen as primary? If the former, then it was surely misleading of Professor Medlin to write, a few lines before, that he does not deplore fantasy, not even deliberate fantasy—for now he seems to be saying that he does deplore it, at any rate when it is not contrasted at once and explicitly (and to its own disadvantage) with true vision.

If on the other hand, "the job of art" means the selective and critical job, rather than the generative job, then Professor Medlin and I may have no significant difference of opinion, for I also believe that it is a proper critical function to interpret works of art in terms of just such distinctions as this one, and, in general, to prefer true vision, once it is recognised, to mere fantasy. (To digress importantly for a moment, we should notice that the word "mere" imports a deceptive simplicity to exceedingly difficult exercises of discrimination and interpretation. Fantasies are not mere fantasies merely by virtue of being fantasies. Fantasies are often, perhaps always, interpretable at some metaphorical or symbolic level that could give them significance for us in spite of the fact that they do not literally model reality, or real possibility. Nor should we overlook *undesirable* possibilities, or consider them, because they are undesirable, not to be real. I am not at all sure why the classless society should be considered a

real possibility, and the capitalist welfare State not to be a real possibility, and I speculate that Professor Medlin may have run together 'undesirable' and 'unreal' here, like any careless idealist. To my mind they are fantasies equally, and the argument about why the world should be nudged in the direction of one, and away from the other, is not settled by the allegation that one is a 'real' possibility and the other is not).

Returning to the main stream of discussion, we have before us a distinction (or at least the possibility of distinction), blurred by the phrase "the job of art", between the artist' generative job and the critics' selective and exhortatory job. It is a distinction that tends to be concealed not only by accidents of phrasing but by the empirical fact that artists also function as critics both during and after the execution of their own works. Is the ultimate source of disagreement between Professor Medlin and myself to be discovered here? I am certainly concerned to open up this distinction and to explore it. He may be concerned to close and obliterate it. Thus far in his most recent article he may fairly be said to have equivocated, no doubt unintentionally; but now he comes down more definitely in favour of a simple identification of generative with critical action. The "job of art" is unitary; not inventive and selective but (inseparable) inventive-and-selective. "How can it be the case", he writes (: 8) "that it is legitimate to make ideological criticism of art, but not to make ideological demands on artist?", and "to claim that an artist's work fails by certain ideological criteria is to complain that the artist has failed to employ these criteria in his work." The artist, it seems, must be held culpable for not having acted percipiently enough, and ruthlessly enough as a critic, while he was engaged in making the work.

I should say that an artist may be so culpable. But then again, he may not. It is not a matter of logical necessity but a contingent question, to which the answer will depend on the circumstances, case by case. The rhetorical confidence of Professor Medlin's question would only be justified if the connection between artists and art works were always and only of a certain kind, that I shall try to characterise in a moment. In fact, works of art may fail by ideological criteria and the artist *not* fail by these criteria, just as a hero of the revolution may fail to defuse a reactionary bomb and still be laid in an honourable grave. Works of art may fail, and they may also succeed, in ways not foreseen and perhaps not even foreseeable by the artists, who can by no means always be held responsible for what others make of their works. The constructive criticism of this own social system, by a committed Soviet novelist, may be read elsewhere, and used, as an effective indictment of the author's society and its ideological basis. It is true that in such a case the possibility may not have been so remote that the author escapes all criticism, but then again it may have been. Michaelangelo could scarcely have envisaged the proceedings that would take place in New South Wales Magistrates Court (unsuccessfully, as it happens) against his *David* for obscenity.

Generalising the point: we do not ordinarily hold A responsible for B says about or does with the things that A has made. Such a chain of responsibility is discerned in quite a restricted range of cases in which the constraints on B as to the use of A's product are tight, and a number of other conditions are satisfied. For example (and the claim was for a long time resisted) when B produces malformed children by prescribing or administering A's insufficiently tested drug. In the more usual sort of case, when B's children develop bad teeth from being fed too many of A's sweet biscuits by their indulgent parent, we do not trace the chain of responsibility back to the manufacturer—although we can imagine circumstances in which it might be proper to do so. But when B drops A's brick on C's foot we know precisely who to blame. The question is: which of these models fits the work of art—thalidomide, sweets or the housebrick? And the answer is, surely, all or any of them, more or less, in some respect and to some extent.

An interpretation and a use of work of art, that it will sustain may or may not implicate the artist. Neither is the artistic generative act always and only properly a critically selective act. It is quite true that every good artist is simultaneously a critic, choosing what to do and what not to do, but it is not the case either that the critical function is identical with the generative function, or that the critical function either must or should outpace the generative function, anticipating and determining in all significant respects the form of the artistic product. Professor Medlin himself seems to reject this authoritarian relation of criticism to



Page 266: Carla Busuttì, *Matchboxes and Necklaces*, 2008  
 Page 268: Littlewhitehead, *It Happened in the Corner...*, 2007  
 Page 269: Maurizio Anzeri, *Giovanni*, 2009  
 Pages 272-3: Jonathan Wateridge, *Jungle Scene with Plane Wreck*, 2007  
 Pages 274-5: Idris Khan, from left to right: *Every... Bernd And Hilla Becher Gable Sided Houses*,  
*Every... Bernd And Hilla Becher Prison Type Gasholders*, *Every... Bernd And Hilla Becher*  
*Spherical Type Gasholders*, all 2004  
 Page 277: Steve Bishop, *Christian Dior—J'adore (Mountain Goat)*, 2009  
 Photos courtesy the artists and Saatchi Gallery, London



art production, for he writes: "To find things out we have to have a bash. We have to canvass possibilities... To canvass possibilities usefully we have to be adventurous" (: 6). And "art is itself a means of investigation. It can and should modify our philosophy just as our philosophy can and should modify art" (: 9). These are sentences that I might have written myself, and I wonder again what divides us. Why do my remarks on the relation between criticism and art so puzzle him, when they are so very like his own?

Partly, but not entirely, it may be misunderstanding. I mistook him (in 'Cultural Imperialism', *Broadsheet*, Sept. 1974) to be saying that ideology comes before art and determines which are to be the correct and properly admired forms of art; and that this determination is made not only after the fact (by the application of public criticism to artists' products but at the time of production (either desirably or necessarily) by virtue of the artists' own ideologico-critical self-restraint. But it now emerges as an area of agreement that art has after all an adventurous function, contributing to the construction of an ideology rather than serving as the mere instrument and creature of an already substantially complete view. The issue, then, may turn out not to be founded on incompatible presuppositions, or errors of logic, but on differences of emphasis and the drawing of different implications from similar assumptions. Why else would Professor Medlin have wished to close down the *Some Recent American Art* exhibition, while I wished that everyone would go and see it?

It seems to me, granted the general view of art and criticism that Professor Medlin and I now appear to hold in common, that it is very proper for American artists like Acconci, Baldessari, Kosuth, Morris, Serra and Weiner to carry out their artistic explorations—even if they do not succeed, even if they do not appeal quickly and easily to a large audience, and in spite of the way they are used by cultural imperialists in the U.S.A. and cultural toadies in Australia. I should prefer to see the climate of criticism in which they work improved. I should prefer that they did not serve, however indirectly, the interests of Mr. & Mrs. J. Heinz II, or the interests of the Australian members of the International Council of MOMA (just as I should myself prefer not to serve the interests of General Motors when I buy a car). I should like to help generate a society in which large audiences would understand and appreciate (which includes finding fault with) the works of intelligent and adventurous artists like these.

Professor Medlin, on the other hand, apparently does not think it proper for artists to make the sort of art that we saw in that exhibition because (roughly) it is unpopular art that does not serve people's 'real' interests and because it has in fact been exploited by American cultural imperialists.

On the second point, anything can be exploited, by anyone. Even chess. Shall we say 'Down with chess!' because it is not a popular game, does not serve anyone's 'real' interests and offers a new field in which America might yet seek to dominate the world?

On the first point, we might begin the argument again, more effectively. Shall we say that Robert Morris does not serve the real interest of the people of the world because his works are unpopular and presented to us out of Heinz tax savings, or shall we say that he does serve the real interests of the people of the world because his artistic explorations are rich in imagination, informed with art-historical and theoretical intelligence, and well worth coming to understand? At least the models and metaphors he has generated against form and formalism in art should be appreciated by Marxists. The mystery is that Mr. Heinz can take them. Maybe he doesn't understand.

## IAN NORTH

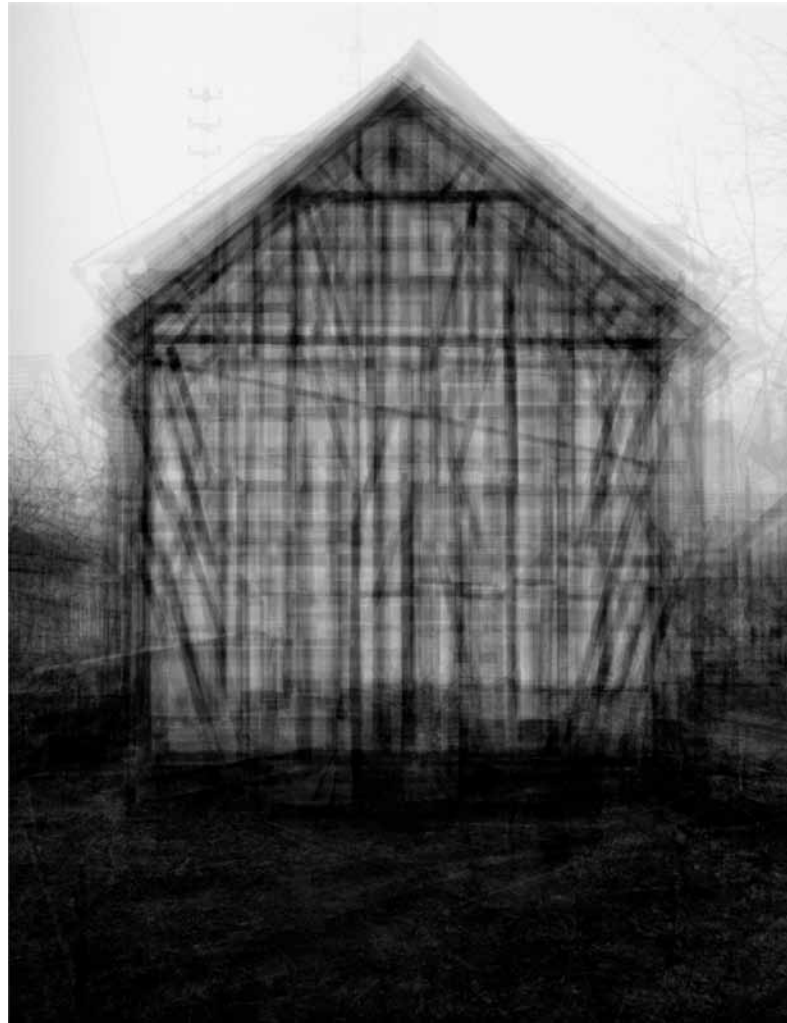
CULTURAL IMPERIALISM REVISITED, *Broadsheet*, Vol 5 No 1, 1975

Hopefully the discussion of art theory between Professors Medlin and Brook in these pages will continue. I wish to restrict myself to the issue of cultural imperialism as raised in Professor Medlin's earlier article ('Cultural Imperialism' *Broadsheet* Sept. 1974) for the case he made out against the Americans is far from clear. It would appear from that article that Professor Medlin subscribes to the Marxist view of the capitalist art world's operation which does something like this: artists are generally obliged by social and economic pressures and ensuing psychological conditioning to work in a manner which will win their work acceptance within their society. In capitalist societies they are obliged to work within the commercial gallery system, which is reinforced by the latter's patronage by public galleries which are funded by rich and powerful commercial and political interests. It follows that public galleries may export art as an act of cultural imperialism on behalf of their trustees or backers. This account may be interpreted in different ways. A gross interpretation (A1) would have fully conscious profit motif as the motivating force in all levels and areas of the art world, as (A2) would have it that there is an unconscious, semi-conscious or fully conscious effort on the part of the intellectuals and art buffs to generate and support an art system which titillates, pleases and even explores the world without threatening the basic order of society. This system can be said to operate by virtue of naïve or misguided artistic and intellectual interests (especially on the part of the artists) and calculated or semi-calculated economic and political considerations (especially on the part of promoters, trustees and the like). By this interpretation exhibitions may be promoted by the powerful as a kind of opium to the intelligentsia, and the art would be essentially hedonistic, nihilistic or elitist, or any combination of those three qualities. A still more subtle refinement, (A3), would have it that an art would sometimes be supported because it was seen to exemplify the 'false' concept of freedom under capitalism<sup>1</sup> or even to demonstrate that freedom by attacking the ruling classes.

Professor Medlin seemed to subscribe mainly to A2, as far as his article was concerned, perhaps thinking, wisely, that A1 was too simple and A3 at best unimportant or at worst implausibly paranoid. But we might first consider whether the tour of *Some Recent American Art* was under any interpretation an act of cultural imperialism – that is, whether it advanced the political or financial interest of its backers.<sup>2</sup>

One has to say right away that Professor Medlin has yet to adduce a single jot of evidence that this was the case.<sup>3</sup> I am not saying that there has not been any cultural imperialism, and still less that there could not have been any. Of course it could be hard to find evidence of it occurring under accounts A2 and A3 which should make one all the more circumspect in making allegations, even if the track record of some of the MOMA's trustees must make one suspicious of their motives. But if it is a truism that no acts are ideologically neutral, the point to make here is another truism, that some acts are more beneficial than others. Even if a degree of credence can be given to vague ascertains of cultural imperialism in the case in question – indeed even if a firm case could be made out – then the advantages of the exercise should be weighed against the disadvantages.<sup>4</sup>

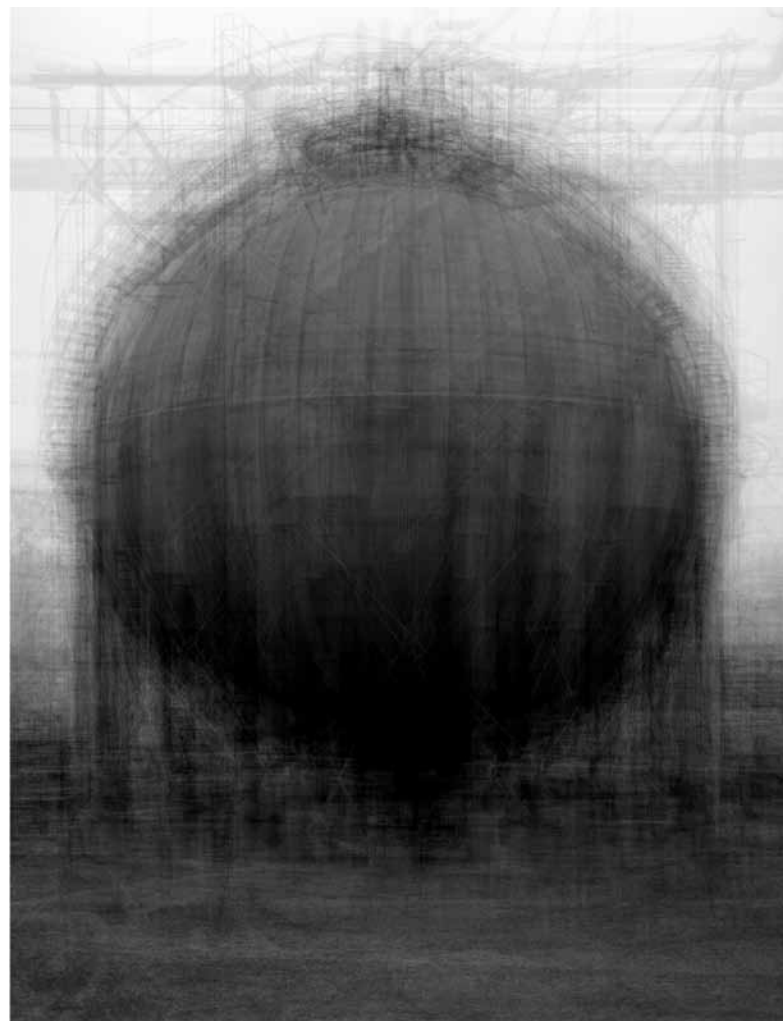
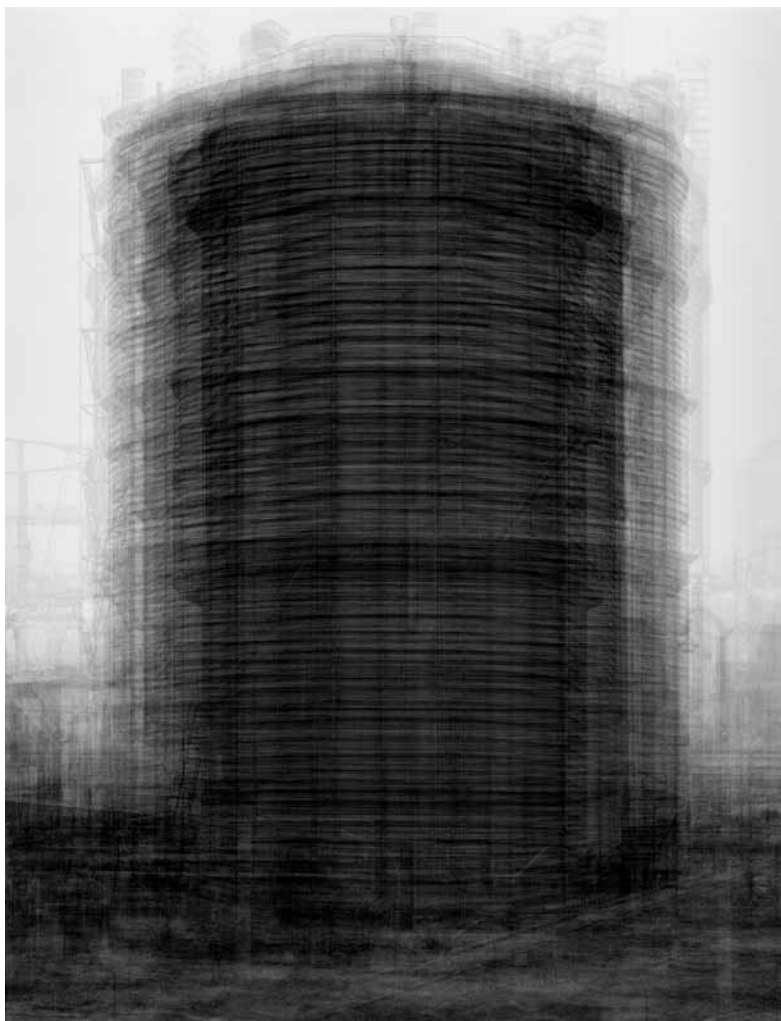
It is not clear whether Professor Medlin objected to *Some Recent American Art* basically because he feels that everything connected with the capitalist ruling classes must be wrong, or whether he objected to the specific content of the exhibition; his article in view of the apparent lack of close attention paid to the art itself. Professor Medlin should be quite clear about this, because either reason makes the arguments he brings forward for the other irrelevant – unless, of course he really wants to advance both at the same time. If his objections are based on the first premise then we are talk about ideology, and as we might then presume him to condemn every product of capitalist society from jeeps to jewellery, his comments on the art are of no special interest<sup>5</sup>. Consequently it would be helpful, (and I mean this in a spirit of genuine curiosity) to know here exactly what sort of society Professor Medlin wants to espouse, and what role and form its art might take.



If on the other hand Professor Medlin wishes to centre his argument around the art in the exhibition, under account A2, then it is inescapable that the art itself is his worst critic. Professor Medlin conceded that several of the works commented on American society<sup>6</sup>. Certainly Serra's *Television Delivers People* could hardly be more explicitly biting as a social comment; nor Bruce Nauman's *Art Make Up: Black* or Robert Morris' *Money*. But nearly all of the other works have similar characteristics, which one might have thought would have met with Professor Medlin's approval – lack of artifice, artiness, fantasy or pretensions to grandeur; instead, a hard looking at the world, using common materials more familiar to a factory worker than a student of the traditional fine arts. Both the media and import of many of the works must be interpreted, in part, as a comment on society, and on American capitalism in particular. For example, a work like Serra's *One Ton Prop* can be seen as a metaphor for the state of the world; unless carefully handled, it will collapse – a perfect piece of pre-revolutionary art, perhaps.<sup>7</sup>

Professor Medlin's account of the art world then, does not tally with the facts of the exhibition<sup>8</sup>, while (I believe), it rather over-estimates the cunning of the fat cat industrialists and politicians. It is the simplest interpretation of the Marxist account of the art world, A1, which is the most valid; and it is most valid for popular culture, and even popular 'high' art<sup>9</sup>, but not significantly for ventures like the *Some Recent American Art* exhibition.

I do not write this in an attempt to denigrate Professor Medlin's politics – indeed I could not honestly make such an attempt for I have only a vague idea of what these might be. Certainly his article shows an antipathy toward imperialism, and a concern about the world's injustices and precarious condition, which I can respect and share. But it seems that he might have found a more appropriate event than *Some Recent American Art* as an opportunity for airing his views.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This notion was advanced by Eva Cockcroft in her article 'Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War' (*Artforum*, June 1974: 39-41), in which Cockcroft claimed that Abstract Expressionism as exemplifying freedom of expression was promoted by MOMA, "a key institution in the cold war" (sic), in exhibitions to London, Paris, Sao Paulo, Tokyo and elsewhere during the 1950s but according to the program's present director, Mr. W. Rasmussen, Cockcroft's article contains many significantly misleading inaccuracies and distortions of fact. Examples: the 1956 show *Modern Art in the U.S.* contained only twenty Abstract Expressionist works of total of one hundred and seven (Cockcroft chose to list only the Abstract Expressionists included); *The New American Prints* exhibition (1958) was generated in part by requests from a number of European art gallery directors, who thus demonstrated their independence from the alleged MOMA brain-washing; Cockcroft's statement that "MOMA bought the U.S.A. pavilion in Venice and took sole responsibility for the exhibitions from 1954-1962" is simply wrong—The Art Institute of Chicago and the Baltimore Museum of Art organised the U.S. representations in 1956 and 1958. (Mr. Rasmussen's remarks were quoted in a letter to the author Mr. John Stringer, 15/11/74). Cockcroft's article is overstated and loosely argued, but it probably quite correctly suggested that the connections between MOMA and the U.S. Government more or less slackened progressively after the Second World War thus casting at least some doubt on the relevance of the article to the present day situation—which, incidentally, reveals little more of substance (though more in circumstantial background detail) than MOMA's own pamphlet *The International Council of the Museum of Modern Art*, and other publications

<sup>2</sup> I take the most important sense of the phrase "cultural imperialism", and the sense in which Professor Medlin is most interested, as the export and promotion of cultural materials for the advancement of political and financial interests. The phrase it also used to mean the export of cultural material for the advancement of the art in question (and those most closely associated with it, i.e. the relevant artist and dealers), especially at the expense of the culture of the country or place receiving the material. The different definitions are a matter of emphasis rather than of kind, but they are worth pointing out, especially as it is often employed for more emotive effect than substantive meaning

<sup>3</sup> One might well speculate that the Rockefellers, the Heinz's and their associates might have gained social prestige, a spot of tax relief, and perhaps even a vague hope of sweetening future business deals; but if that is all one can do—and even if one was justified in so doing—then the phrase "cultural imperialism" is verbal overkill

<sup>4</sup> The most obvious advantage is of course the opportunity to experience work at first hand that would otherwise be known only at second hand to most people in Australia. Few would want to suggest that cultural isolationism would help either the artistic or political strength of Australia

<sup>5</sup> Any thoughts here of a blanket condemnation or ban on shows from MOMA should be considered by any but the most ideological dogmatic against the remarkable quality and diversity of its overseas exhibitions. To list only those that circulated in Australia—these are *Family of Man* (1955-57); *Contemporary Printmaking in the U.S.A.* (1958-59); *Visionary Architecture* (1962-64);

*Abstract Watercolours by 14 Americans* (1965-66); *Jaques Lipchitz: Bronze Sketches 1912-62* (1965-66); *Architecture Without Architects* (1966-67); *Two Decades of American Painting* (1966-67); *The Photographer's Eye* (1967-70); *Brassai* (1970-71); *100 Master Drawings* (1971-72); *Bill Brandt* (1970-73); *Surrealism* (1971-73); *New Photography U.S.A.* (1969-73); *Picasso: Master Printmaker* (1972-73); *Modern Prints of the West* (1973-75) and *Tamarind Impressions* (1969-74). It should also be noted that MOMA is the only American art museum with established policy of regularly sending major exhibitions abroad. (The U.S. Department of State from time to time asks museums to prepare exhibitions for abroad, circulated under Government auspices, and the Smithsonian Institute send exhibitions abroad. The latter are closely identified with the U.S. Government, and are often regarded as compromised in quality)

<sup>6</sup> Professor Medlin resorted to describing the relevant video pieces as being "highly inaccessible" in an effort to accommodate them in his argument. I have submitted the text of one of these works, Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People* to the editor of this publication for reprinting, in the hope that it might be of interest to anyone who had similar problems

<sup>7</sup> Professor Medlin was unable to see this, possibly, for two reasons apart from his ideology: remarks in his article suggest that his concept of a work of visual art is conditioned by conventional paradigms; and secondly he seemed to place an unfortunate, if understandable, over-reliance on artists' catalogue statements. (Artists' statements are notorious for their unreliability). Private conversations with Donald Judd have showed him to have very trenchant and critical ideas about American society, but it is hardly necessary to know this to arrive at a more validly generous assessment of his art than Professor Medlin's. Judd's 'official' comments must be seen as an attempt to ward off projection onto his work political rhetoric, myth or literary fantasy, which would obscure his intention to make works as directly (and thus refreshingly) apprehensible as possible. Reality was the name of the game, if I can dare a one word summation, and not obfuscation through nihilism or hedonism

<sup>8</sup> This applies quite apart from the unflattering fact that it also makes short work of the integrity and perception of the artist and art museum personnel involved with the exhibition in question, but detailed comments here would be taken, no doubt, as the irrelevancies of a manacled mind even more than the rest of my article. Just two small points about the Australian art world:

a. *Blue Poles*: it is perfectly normal for a gallery to commission a buyer to negotiate on its behalf, as happened in this instance

b. Daniel Thomas: readers of Professor Medlin's article may be surprised to learn that Mr. Thomas panned (albeit gently) the *Tamarind Impressions* show from MOMA (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22.9.74)

<sup>9</sup> c.f. Donald Brook, 'How Shall the Arts Flourish', C.A.S. of Australia, *Broadsheet*, November 1974: 34