

VISUAL ANIMALS

CROSSOVERS, EVOLUTION AND NEW AESTHETICS

BRINGING TOGETHER KEY RESEARCHERS IN DISCIPLINES USUALLY WORKING AT A TANGENT TO EACH OTHER—NOTABLY INCLUDING ART HISTORY, ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY AND BIO-AESTHETICS—TO DISCUSS NEW OR REVISED CONCEPTS OF ART THAT MAY INFLUENCE CURRENT APPROACHES TO THE WRITING OF WORLD ART HISTORY
CURATOR IAN NORTH

18 WEDNESDAY—19 THURSDAY APRIL 2007

ART GALLERY OF SA FUNCTION ROOMS, NORTH TERRACE, ADELAIDE

WEDNESDAY 18 APRIL

10.00–10.30 am	Registration
10.30–10.45am	Welcome: Christopher Menz, Director, Art Gallery of South Australia; Professor Alan Johnson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), University of Adelaide; Alan Cruickshank, Director CACSA
10.45–11.15am	IAN NORTH , Adjunct Professor, University of South Australia; Visiting Research Fellow, University of Adelaide <i>Notes Towards a Natural Way to do Art History</i>
11.15–11.55am	BRIAN BOYD , Distinguished Professor, English Literature, University of Auckland <i>Artistic Animals: Common and Unique Features of Music and Visual Art</i>
11.55am–12.35pm	Dr JENNIFER McMAHON , Lecturer, Philosophy, University of Adelaide <i>It is not the Visual Animal in us that Explains Our Capacity for Art</i>
12.35–2pm	Lunch (own arrangements)
2.00–2.40pm	DONALD BROOK , Emeritus Professor, Visual Arts, Flinders University of South Australia <i>For Art: Against Aesthetics</i>
2.40–3.20pm	IAN McLEAN , Associate Professor, Art History, University of Western Australia <i>Against The Grain: Towards a Natural History of Art and Taste</i>
3.20–3.40 pm	Break
3.40–4.30 pm	Respondent: ROD TAYLOR , Associate Professor, Central School of Art, Adelaide Open Forum—Chair: CHRIS MORTENSEN , Emeritus Professor, Philosophy, University of Adelaide

THURSDAY 19 APRIL

10.00–10.35am	Registration
10.35–11.15am	DENIS DUTTON , Associate Professor, Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Canterbury <i>Landscape and Longing: The Role of Evolution in Aesthetic Preferences</i>
11.15–11.55am	Dr LINDA WILLIAMS , Coordinator, Art History & Theory, RMIT University <i>Curve—Fold—Process: Notes Toward a Grounded Historiography of Culture</i>
11.55am–12.35pm	Dr REX BUTLER , Senior Lecturer, Art History, University of Queensland <i>A Short History of UnAustralian Art</i>
12.35–2pm	Lunch (own arrangements)
2.00–2.40pm	JILL BENNETT , Associate Professor, Art Theory, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales <i>Migratory Aesthetics: Art and Politics After Identity</i>
2.40–3.20pm	PETER JAMES SMITH , Professor, Mathematics and Art, RMIT University <i>Rediscovering Lines of Longitude—Signs of 'New Capture' for Art Practice at Postmodernism's Demise</i>
3.20–3.40pm	Break
3.40–4.30pm	Respondent: STEPHEN LOO , Senior Lecturer, Architecture, University of South Australia Open Forum—Chair: CHRIS MORTENSEN , Emeritus Professor, Philosophy, University of Adelaide

SPEAKERS

JILL BENNETT

Migratory Aesthetics: Art And Politics After Identity

Abstract: This paper considers how aesthetics is conditioned by migration—and how contemporary forms of community find aesthetic expression. It discusses various recent exhibitions focused on migration and movement of people, tracing the shift from identity to relationality in contemporary art and curatorial practice. It argues that the increasing focus on communality in contemporary art is a key development in terms of political aesthetics. Grounded in aesthetic (sensory) perception rather than representation, art that deals with being-in-common constitutes a fundamentally aesthetic project in a way that the visual expression of identity politics does not.

Bio note: Jill Bennett is Associate Professor of Art Theory, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics (CCAP), University NSW and Associate Dean Research for the College of Fine Arts, University NSW. Her most recent books include *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford University Press, 2005); *Dennis Del Favero: Fantasm* (University NSW Press, 2004); and (ed. with Roseanne Kennedy) *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003). She has curated a number of exhibitions, including *Prepossession*, Sydney and Belfast, 2005. Through CCAP she is completing an ARC funded project titled *Ethical Globalism on New Forms of Political Art*, and commencing an ARC Linkage Project, *Construction, Connection and Community: Measuring Asian Art's Contribution to Culture* (with Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, NSW and Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai).

BRIAN BOYD

Artistic Animals: Common And Unique Features Of Music And Visual Art

Abstract: The *Visual Animals Conference* was partly inspired by the book *The Literary Animal* (edited by Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, 2005). Steven Pinker, the best-known advocate of the human mind as intricately adapted by evolution, has also been the foremost critic of adaptive explanations of art. He has recently reviewed *The Literary Animal* and deepened his critique (*Philosophy and Literature*, April 2007). He challenges the assumptions that art, except for narrative, has any adaptive function and that different arts like music and visual art should have similar functions. In reply I will discuss both the common adaptive functions of all the arts, and the origins and unique functions and design, of music and of visual art.

Bio note: Brian Boyd, University Distinguished Professor of English, University of Auckland, has written many prize-winning works on novelist Vladimir Nabokov, translated into ten languages, but has lately been working on *Evolution, Cognition And Fiction: On the Origin of Stories* (an evolutionary account of why we tell stories, with analyses of two different kinds of 'early' story, *The Odyssey* and Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who!*), and *Heads and Tales* (evolutionary analyses of classic, modernist and postmodernist storytelling: *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Ulysses* and *Maus*).

DONALD BROOK

For Art: Against Aesthetics

Abstract: Lost in the maze of postmodern relativism, artists understandably complain of insecurity. In this paper I deplore the reparative effort that is being made by some art-theorists to restore beauty to trans-historical centrality. I propose instead a revelation theory in which revelation is conceived as the unanticipated acquisition of new memes. Newly acquired memes do not, like presentations of the beautiful, logically compel approval of the world. They do not arrive tailored to our preferences. The inexhaustibly impersonal nature of our epiphanies should induce a deeper reverence for the world than is due to it on the ground that we can not but admire its beauty. There is thus a prima facie conflict between a trans-historical account of art and a historically relativistic account of the phrase 'work of art.' I propose a resolution in which the artworld is seen as only marginally distinctive within the general domain of entertainment. In particular, the candidates that it assigns to the class of works of art are not disqualified by the fact that its comprehension of what art is may be erroneous.

Bio note: Donald Brook is Emeritus Professor of Visual Arts at Flinders University. His academic career overlaps his related careers as a practicing sculptor and as an art critic. He was active in the initiation of the Tin Sheds in Sydney and the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, both of which tried to relate the practices of artists to a perspicuous theoretical understanding of the nature of art.

REX BUTLER

A Short History Of Unaustralian Art

Abstract: For a long time, we have lived with a story of Australian art—the slow coming-into-being of an art that expressed where we lived and who we were. But what would it mean to propose an 'UnAustralian' history of Australian art—a history of the immigrants and emigrants, of all those who did not make an art of a national character? In fact, as we see, it is these artists who are the true precursors to the artists of today. And it is this art history that will be that of the 21st century—not the 19th century history of empires and colonies, nor the 20th century one of postcolonialism, but a history of total cultural interconnectedness, in which no place can be understood outside of every other. This paper suggests that there exists an 'UnAustralian' art history of equal artistic richness and tradition as the more usual Australian one.

Bio note: Rex Butler is Senior Lecturer in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland. He has written and edited a number of books on Australian art and is currently working on a book on 'UnAustralian' art.

IAN NORTH

Notes Towards A Natural Way To Do Art History

Abstract: The indigenous art revolution in recent decades raises issues of beauty, cross-culturalism and art's notional spirituality with particular forcefulness. Reactions by non-Indigenous art historians to Emily Kam Ngwarraye's meteoric career, considered as a representative case study, are contradictory. On the one hand they accord the artist considerable attention in terms of cultural context, including extensive discussion of her relation to Western modernism, but on the other hand query art's capacity to operate cross-culturally, reflecting presumptions of cultural incommensurability and social constructivism. This paper seeks to argue that it may be possible to minimise this contradiction by drawing on insights from two disciplines outside of the usual purview of art history, namely analytic philosophy and bio-aesthetics.

Bio note: Ian North is an artist and writer. He is also Adjunct Professor of Visual Arts, University of South Australia, a Visiting Research Fellow, University of Adelaide, and was (until 1984) a curator. He has written a number of essays considering the implications of a globalising art world with reference to the indigenous art revolution, including 'Expanse', 1998; 'StarAboriginality', 2001 and 'Living with Chai', 2001. He has widely exhibited since 1985, working with photography and painting, often combined, exploring postconceptual approaches to landscape themes.

DENIS DUTTON

Landscape And Longing: The Role Of Evolution In Aesthetic Preferences

Abstract: The notion that form is at the heart of visual aesthetic response—and that 'content' is merely literary, rather than painterish—is a modernist shibboleth. A Darwinian approach to visual art shows that modernist theory is unsupportable. Using landscape as an example, I will argue that the response to painting involves a combination of factors, some clearly involving hardwired content preferences.

Bio note: Denis Dutton is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. He has edited the Johns Hopkins University Press journal, *Philosophy and Literature* since 1976, and is also the founder and editor of the website *Arts & Letters Daily* since 1998. His book, *The Art Instinct*, is scheduled for publication later this year from The Oxford University Press. He writes not only for academic journals, but also for newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Los Angeles Times*. He is a former director of Radio New Zealand.

IAN McLEAN

Against The Grain: Towards A Natural History Of Art And Taste

Abstract: While Darwin has little credibility as an art theorist, the art world has shown considerable interest in the role of nature in art for at least two hundred years—evident in the general romantic undercurrents of modern art, and more recently, the interest in sexuality, the body and the unconscious, even if from a Freudian rather than a Darwinian perspective, and the influence of Deleuze, as in Elizabeth Grosz's recent claim that "art is what is most animal in us, not the most rational force in us". However not addressed is the really revolutionary consequence of Darwinism (for modern and contemporary art) that no matter how subjective, indeterminate, free, artificial and independent human ideas and cultural formations might seem, they are subject to the universal, absolute and inescapable imperatives of nature. This paper attempts to address this by combining a reading of Darwin's and Kant's very different theories of taste.

Bio note: Associate Professor Ian McLean is an art historian at the University of Western Australia. He has published widely in Australia and overseas on Australian and Aboriginal art, and is on the advisory board of the London based art journal *Third Text*. His book publications include *White Aborigines* and *The Art of Gordon Bennett*. If he has rarely ventured into the arcane world of philosophy and aesthetics, except for personal pleasure and distraction, he has for some time been a reader of populist Darwinist scholarship and has a keen interest in the issues of this conference.

JENNIFER McMAHON

It Is Not The Visual Animal In Us That Explains Our Capacity For Art

Abstract: If we conceive of ourselves as animals, it might be accurate to call us visual animals. The visual cortex is much larger in us relative to the size of our brains than in other animals. However, a large visual cortex might not necessarily translate into a heightened susceptibility to fine visual distinctions over auditory or kinetic distinctions, at least not in all cultural contexts. I am going to shift the focus from the visual and instead concern myself with the non-linguistic to address the spirit of this symposium—that art engages a part of the human brain that is neglected by the literal and logical artefacts of culture. After all, when our attention to art is limited to the literal or logical, we ignore the art in art. I will argue that the aspect of art which eludes literal translation and is relevant to anything being art, is that aspect which contributes to our notions of freedom, infinity, even immortality, that is, ideas for which there are no counterparts in nature or experience. Regardless of how illusory these ideas may be, our capacity for conceiving of them is linked to the survival instinct and hence we find them very compelling. We have grounds then for arguing that the foundation of our capacity for art is objective and rational, without being tied to literal or logical forms. My conclusion will be that it is our reflective rather than visual self that makes art possible.

Bio note: Jennifer McMahon has a PhD in Philosophy, Australian National University, Canberra (1997). She was Lecturer in Arts Education at the University of Canberra (1996–2001) and is currently Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Adelaide (since 2002). She has presented many academic papers both nationally and internationally; has been invited to speak on ABC Radio National programs *All in the Mind* (2003) and *Australia Talks Back* (2006) and the SA Goethe Society (2004). Recent publications include a chapter on beauty in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, London: Routledge and her book *Aesthetics and Material Beauty: Aesthetics Naturalised* will be published by Routledge in New York this year.

PETER JAMES SMITH

Rediscovering Lines Of Longitude—

Signs Of 'New Capture' For Art Practice At Postmodernism's Demise

Abstract: The emerging period from late postmodernism has been one of post-photography's 'capture'. The hopeful sequence of manifestos that carried a modernist agenda across last century was tied to waves of cultural revolutions. We are now entering a new century of ignited religious and ethnic passions. Ultimately, art will be sustained by a passionate 'New Capture' addressing truth, belief, awe and inspiration. These are not postmodernist terms. The term 'longitude' recalls John Harrison's marine chronometer that revolutionised navigation and trade during the eighteenth-century. This period of the Enlightenment accompanied a blossoming of cultural and scientific achievement. Our longitudinal survey represents a glance across a global arc, to when art and science moved humanity forward together. In this we leapfrog modernism, to re-examine concepts such as truth and beauty: for example through Kant's dynamic and mathematical sublimities. For the last three hundred years, the mathematical sublime has been advanced by academic mathematicians. They engaged in an 'art' but few could follow their practice—but London photographer Justin Mullins created worldwide interest with his 2006 exhibition of photographs of typeset equations, signposting the 'New Capture'.

Bio note: Dr Peter James Smith is Professor of Mathematics and Art at RMIT University in Melbourne where he is Head of the School of Creative Media (photography, creative writing, screenwriting, film and television production, video production, multimedia, music production, digital art, computer gaming). As a mathematician he currently holds an Australia Research Council Linkage Grant in the area of statistical modelling with censored data. He is an artist of over forty solo exhibitions and his works are held in many public, private and corporate collections in New Zealand, Australia and internationally. He is currently working on a new book, *Truth+Beauty*.

LINDA WILLIAMS

Curve—Fold—Process: Notes Toward A Grounded Historiography Of Culture

Abstract: Stepping back decisively from the fantasy of postmodernity, this paper focuses on our own historical juncture in which the non-human world as the foundation of all cultural production is poised to enter an era of global environmental crisis. This emerging crisis is now a matter of scholarly consensus rather than dispute, and this paper takes seriously a premise of the symposium to 'examine art from the ground of art experience upwards rather than downwards from ideology'. Rather than approaching the experience of art phenomenologically however, or at the level of cultural reception and affects, the paper holds to the view that the need to interpret the production of culture in relation to materiality, and in particular to a reflective history of our social interdependence with the ontological materiality of the non-human world, has never been more crucial. This paper then, aims to provide preliminary notes towards the kind of interdisciplinary historiographical models required of cultural critique and bioaesthetics in the age of environmental crisis.

Bio Note: Dr Linda Williams is senior lecturer, Cultural History and Critical Theory and coordinator, Art History & Theory in the School of Art, RMIT University, Melbourne. She is also an RMIT University research cluster leader in the field of arts and sustainability. Her recent research interests include histories of human-animal relations, social theory and the connections between cultural history and the history and philosophy of science and technology. Along with recent publication in these fields, she has published widely as an art critic.

RESPONDENTS AND CHAIR

STEPHEN C. LOO (Respondent)

Bio note: Stephen Loo is the Director of the Visual Art and Design Research Group and Senior Lecturer, Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture and Design, University of South Australia. His research interest lies in the relationship between ontology and the production of theory, and has published on the relations between language, affect and life; image and the machine as part of a biophilosophy of the contemporary subject; alternative ethico-aesthetic and ecological models for human action; and the indeterminacy of experimental digital thinking. He is also a practising architect and partner of architecture and interpretive practice Mulloway Studio.

CHRIS MORTENSEN (Chair)

Bio note: Emeritus Professor (formerly Hughes Professor) of Philosophy, University of Adelaide. He holds a PhD in Philosophy and Doctor of Science in Mathematics; is a Fellow of the Academy of Humanities of Australia, Centenary Medallist 2003. His interests embrace philosophy, including especially metaphysics, logic, philosophy of science and applied ethics. He is an interested bystander of aesthetics, due partly to art being inherently interesting and partly to being married to an art historian (Catherine Speck) for thirty-five years.

ROD TAYLOR (Respondent)

Bio note: Rod Taylor is an Associate Professor of Flinders University and the Head of Adelaide Central School of Art Incorporated, which he co-founded with his then wife, Heather Nicholson, in 1982. He studied art in Adelaide at the South Australian School of Art and in London at St. Martins. As an artist he has work in both private and public collections. His last solo exhibition of drawings and paintings was held at Adelaide Central Gallery in 2005. His interest in the themes, theories and discussion of the symposium derives from his attempt to create a content-based curriculum for ACSA that equips people choosing to establish and sustain a practical career in visual art and at the same time do justice to the diversity and dynamic nature of the historical, cross-cultural and contemporary practices that we refer to as art.

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