

THE ANNUAL
CROSSROADS
SHORT ESSAY COMPETITION

2009

Pages 4-8

Postgraduate Section – 1st Place

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The Seventies in Australia: The First Decade of the 21st Century

ABSTRACT

While usually referred to as the ‘anything goes’ decade, the importance of the seventies in Australian art has been overlooked. From the perspective of the 21st century, the seventies appear to provide the link needed to connect the modern and the contemporary eras. This essay examines a few of the ideas and theories that made the seventies a presage to the art of the future.

BIOGRAPHY

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THE SEVENTIES IN AUSTRALIA: THE FIRST DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In 1962, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788-1960*ⁱ mapped what would become the canonical account of the history of Australian art from European colonization to the post-war years. At the same time, his book can also be seen to narrate the search for an appropriate visual language to express what it is to be Australian. A man of his time, Bernard Smith concluded his history with the claim that Australian painting had reached its apogee in the figurative expressionism of the 1950s. There have been subsequent histories of Australian art nevertheless, but they remain grounded in Smith's summation of Australian art as one that centred on issues of nationalism, by successively adopting styles from overseas and adapting them to the Antipodes. Looking back from the perspective of the 21st century that historical model is looking increasingly problematic because the account it provides is unable to explain Australia's participation in the contemporary global environment.

In hindsight, it is the seventies period that appears to derail Smith's modernist trajectory. Defined here as stretching from the late sixties to the early eighties, the seventies era played an important role in preparing Australia's visual culture for the new millennium. During that time, a rash of anti-establishment arts 'movements' - Feminism, Internationalism, Pop, Conceptual, Ephemeral, and Protest art, and the emergence of Contemporary Aboriginal Art as a fine-art category, for example - emerged to challenge the nation's traditionally conservative art hierarchy and gave impetus to a wide range of concepts which have continued to challenge and inspire the Australian art world, and by extension Australian consciousness, ever since. Although at variance in many ways, these movements were united by their desire to pull away from the dominance of the modernist linear narrative, and the expectation that the main purpose of Australian art was to reflect upon the character of the nation. Told from a traditional art historical perspective by which the Australian story unfolds from the past, the seventies period appears as a chaotic hotch-potch of stylistic experimentations whose misdirected aims and ideals were, for many, mercifully short-lived. The same period viewed from the opposite perspective, however, gives a polemically different view. Looking back to the seventies from the contemporary era, the period exhibits many of the characteristics we identify with the current or contemporary era: a preoccupation with the present moment, an awareness of the plurality of existence, a rejection of hierarchies, and the sense of a global community. This essay signals the importance of this period as one that developed many key ideas and theories in response to the revolutionary mood of the time. In doing so, it can be seen to have played a crucial role in the evolution of the expanded sense consciousness, which, particularly in art, now characterises the global milieu of the new millennium.

The seventies in Australia became known as the 'anything goes' decade, when rhyme and reason were lost in the environment of anarchy and uncertainty that overtook the arts. On the whole since then, Australian art historians happily left well alone: the maze of threads that twisted and turned through the decade seemed to have been worked into a tangled ideological knot by the end of the decade, and according to at least one historian, most artists and critics were happy to leave its politics in the past.ⁱⁱ From the perspective of the twenty-first century, however, the seventies period appears not only to make more sense, but reveals Australia's essentially modernist art historical canon in a new light. Against the pluralism that characterised the seventies, the rigid ideologies and utopian thinking of Modernism appears hopelessly limited, handicapped by a blindness - often described as white and male - to the spectrum of experience which is now recognised by a global view.

The art world of the seventies was already global by nature, and thus it pre-empted this sense of expanded consciousness. Many of the movements which responded to the growing revolutionary undercurrents at the time grew out of the grass-roots protests that had flared at the margins of the European colonial empires, protesting against the hegemonic domination of Western modernist ideology and its cultural and economic imperialism. It was the student riots in Paris in May 1968 though, that came to symbolize the general wave of radicalism that answered the calls for revolution echoing around the world. In his 1984 essay 'Periodizing the sixties,'ⁱⁱⁱ American theorist Fredric Jameson described the era from about 1968 to 1974 as an international situation that occurred as a necessary outcome of the wider context of its time; and although his examination is limited to the United States, France and the Third World, the issues Jameson explored also resonant with the situation in Australia. Jameson's discussion eschewed the imposition of any form of traditional narrative on the diverse set of circumstances that the period presented, and instead proposed a 'concept' of the period which would gather together the many separate strands to offer a collective impression of the complex international condition. One such example was the way that Third-World resistance movements against colonization provided the politico-cultural models for movements within the counterculture.^{iv} But perhaps the most significant by-product of these independence movements, especially for the emerging counterculture, was the existential acknowledgement that the colonized Third World subsequently demanded from the Western colonizers. This went beyond the recognition of 'natives' as equal human beings, to the equally revolutionary recognition of 'those inner

colonized of the First world – ‘minorities’, marginals and women’^v who had unofficially endured a similar plight of oppression. This self-identification amongst marginalized groups would eventually trigger the emergence of the new ‘collective identities’ or ‘subjects of history’^{vi}, which would in turn, particularly in the arts, animate the new social forces that revolutionized the cultural and political landscape. These groups united around a common desire to repudiate the totalizing philosophies and politics which had, until then, cast them as ‘other’, and issues such as these were addressed by emerging new theoretical methodologies which deconstructed Western culture’s symbolic systems^{vii} to reveal and challenge traditional truths.

Much of the impetus for change during this period came from the world’s youth. Theodore Roszak’s book *The Making of a Counter Culture*^{viii} reflects on the formation of a collective identity born out of a shared disenchantment with the quality of life in a society whose rationality was based on industrial growth. Although it was not confined to the United States of America, that was where this feeling of disillusion with ‘the system’ most quickly found expression as the Counterculture movement among the young post-war college-educated generation. The evils of technocracy, which were its prime target, were at their most visible in America. While the post-war period was one of great production and prosperity in the United States, many young people became increasingly dismayed and numbed by the throw-away culture that accompanied it. Roszak noted the importance of thinkers such as neo-Marxist philosopher and critic Herbert Marcuse during this period. Marcuse raised the critical awareness of the situation through his descriptions of this climate of affluence as a social tactic of ‘repressive desublimation [which allowed] just enough freedom to dampen and integrate discontent - but not enough to endanger the discipline necessary for a stable industrial order.’^{ix} Thus informed, this generation of youth found the poets, singers and activist figures who advocated fundamental change preferable as role models to their parents, who seemed trapped by their own consumption. According to Roszak, despite the fact that it would be impossible to know how many joined the counterculture movement, it would, anyway, probably be more accurate to speak of it as a shared *vision*: ‘more important than its size was its depth - everything questioned - family, work, education, success, child rearing, male-female relations, sexuality, urbanism, science, technology, progress. ... [from the meaning of wealth, life and love to the basis of knowledge, reason and excellence] ... the counter culture dared to envisage a better future.’^x

The art world was particularly sensitive to such changes. Following the sixties, a surge in the production of philosophy and theory specific to the art world analysed the underlying structures which maintained the modernist ideologies that had driven western culture for at least the past century. Philosopher Arthur Danto, for example, questioned the basis upon which something could be categorized as art. In 1962 in ‘The Artworld’^{xi}, he proposed that art was not necessarily produced by an individual genius mastering his craft, but was the product of cultural organisation. After looking at the emerging art of Pop, which drew its iconography directly from popular culture, Danto identified a paradox inherent in art: while theory should be able to point to what was art, in the case of Pop it was its context that made the art possible.^{xii} From this Danto suggested that to say something *is* art used the word ‘is’ in a special sense, which he called *artistic identification*. He wrote: ‘...the *is* of artistic identification ... is not tautology... [it] requires something the eye cannot decry – and atmosphere of the artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an *artworld*’.^{xiii} This approach freed art of its materiality, since it now became an attitude, or a framework that, once imposed, distinguished the reality of the art object as special and different to everyday reality. This expanded understanding of the conditions of art imparted new and rich complexity to what could be considered to belong to the art world and was applicable across its entire history.^{xiv}

Roland Barthes’ *Death of the author*^{xv} performed a similar deconstruction of the structures underlying creative production in 1968. Although written as a piece of literary criticism, Barthes’ analysis of a text ‘as a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’^{xvi} claimed that to assign a single interpretation to a text, even that of the author, was ‘to impose a limit on that text.’^{xvii} His theory had equal application in visual art, where the implication was that the meaning of a work was created in its reception by its reader, or audience. This underlined the growing sense of plurality in the art scene, which called into question the certainties of Modernism. Increasingly the sense in which a variety of views could be seen as equally valid gained acceptance and the rights of individuals to question the framing and interpretation of social signs and mores was recognised.

Lucy Lippard’s *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966-1972*, written ‘to expose the chaotic network of ideas in the air,’^{xviii} provided an early insight into the way in which conceptual artists of this period sought out new forms which were made plausible by concepts like those of Danto and Barthes, and which further undermined modernist logic. In 1976, Rosalind Krauss echoed the feeling when she wrote: ‘Almost everyone is agreed about ’70s art. It is diversified, split, factionalized. Unlike the art of the last several decades, its energy does not seem to flow through a single channel for which a synthetic term, like Abstract Expressionism, or Minimalism, might be found... ’70s art is proud of its own dispersal.’^{xix} In Australia, as

elsewhere, changes in the way in which art was thought about produced a plethora of newly 'visible' art forms, and prompted an unprecedented flourishing of art criticism which reflected the increased importance of critical theory in the dialectics of this new art world.

Possibly the most conspicuous manifestation of a new paradigm of thinking appeared in the Women's Movement in art, itself part of the wider Feminist movement within the Counterculture. The publication of Linda Nochlin's seminal article 'Why have there been no great women artists' in 1971^{xx} focused on the systemically discriminatory nature of the Western art history and galvanized interest in the Women's Movement. Its recouping of the female presence in the past was a crucial factor in the shift to a Revisionist approach to art-history which would become the dominant method of history-telling in the postmodern age. Discourses surrounding Feminism became central to an interdisciplinary style of theory which was 'more politically committed than traditional philosophy, but also more intellectually rigorous than conventional criticism.'^{xxi} These theories variously attempted to reconcile the different modes of analysis found in Marxism, Freudianism, Feminism and film studies, for example, or attempted to apply one model across a wide range of practices, so that theories of the structure of language could be applied in contexts ranging from art to architecture to cinema.^{xxii}

Conceptions like these were crystallized and disseminated in the different approaches which now characterize the art of the 21st century – the so-called 'contemporary era'. In *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, editors Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee describe 'Contemporaneity' as 'a simultaneity of antinomies ... [one of whose] most striking features ... is coexistence of a very distinct sense of time, of what it is to exist now, to be in place, and to act, in relation to imagined histories and possible futures.'^{xxiii} Right around the world, these antinomies had their gestation around the seventies period, summarized in Australia with the word *dissent* by art historian Charles Green.^{xxiv} As elsewhere, art in Australia became increasingly linked with radicalism, and artists explored new modes of practice that engaged with and reflected the social conditions of the time.^{xxv} According to Green, despite their geographical remove, Australian artists were profoundly affected by many of the idealistic cultural, social and political impulses circulating on the international scene and identified their practice with its 'alternative' culture. Although, as Terry Smith has observed, the recognition of the existence of multiple valid alternatives still includes 'Modernism- even as it recedes within them.'^{xxvi} Even so, the systematic deconstruction of Modernism's ideological assumptions and reductive thinking by artists, philosophers and theorists that began around the seventies opened up the possibilities and processes of art making. Feminism, through its confrontation of the almost universal patriarchal hegemony, and through its efforts to re-incorporate meaning into art work, had turned its slogan - 'the personal is political' – into a catchcry for the empowerment of other marginalized groups. In the Australian context, for example, this approach has become the *modus operandi* for Aboriginal artists, who first produced their art in a contemporary form during the early seventies as a tactical intervention into the dominant white-fella system for their own political purposes.^{xxvii} Viewed from the 21st century, the seventies era in Australia and around the world foreshadowed many of the issues that would remain of concern well into the future. It is thus of crucial importance as the period that can make sense of the paradigmatic shift that occurred between the modern and the contemporary eras.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting, 1788-1960* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962).

ⁱⁱ Charles Green gives ample evidence of this in: Charles Green, "Living in the Seventies" in the *Off the Wall / In the Air: A Seventies' Selection* exhibition catalogue held at the Monash University Gallery and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Gallery, 1991), 5-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," *The ideologies of theory: essays 1971-1986* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 178-208.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 180-186. Maoism, and the Algerian and Cuban revolutions of 1959 were all, in different ways, seen as models.

^v *Ibid.*, 181.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 193. Language would be one such symbolic system.

^{viii} Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. First California paperback edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

^{ix} *Ibid.*, xxii.

^x *Ibid.*, xxvi-xxxiii.

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- ^{xi} Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld" in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, Joseph Margolis (Ed.) 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 132-44.
- ^{xii} Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* 1964 reproduction of a soap powder box is one example.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 139.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 144.
- ^{xv} Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author" in *Image, Music, Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 142-48.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 146.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 147.
- ^{xviii} Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972: A Cross-Reference Book of Information on Some Aesthetic Boundaries* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), 5.
- ^{xix} Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index Part 1" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 196-209:196.
- ^{xx} Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews* January (1971): 22-39, 67-71.
- ^{xxi} Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art since 1900 : Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004): 571.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxiii} Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), xv.
- ^{xxiv} Green, "Living in the Seventies," 5.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, 6.
- ^{xxvi} Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, xiv.
- ^{xxvii} Traditional Aboriginal art forms were first produced as a fine art form using acrylic paint in Papunya in the Northern Territory in 1971.