Fear of Texture

Imants Tillers

I had off nex day no digging to do only in my head for Nex Nite and my connexion. I had a nuff and moren a nuff to connect with all I had to do wer sort it out my head wer perwel humming and spinning with it.

Riddley Walker [1]

... I think and think and think and think and then I paint around the think which seems to sort of ring some sort of bell somewhere inside my head. It's almost like that.

John Firth-Smith [2]

Art in Australia is about to get thicker. Miles and miles of canvas are to be unfurled and acres of thick impasto paint are to be scraped and scumbled by thousands of antipodean 'Art Ants' galvanised into a frenzied collective action. [3] It is as though the precariously flat and provisional surface of Australian Art up to now is about to be given some 'depth' and integrity by the extrusion of tonnes of paint, spread evenly to a 'meaty' consistency over an exponentially expanding area.

The recent appearance of a promotional package from the Australian paint manufacturers 'Chromacryl' anticipates if not 'pre-creates' this reality. Addressed nationally to 'Painting Department' it includes:

* "One small piece of canvas with heavily applied Atelier Impasto Acrylic."
* "Reproduction from (an insert in) March issue of *Art and Australia* showing one of the first acrylic 'oil' paintings by Michael Johnson."

The letter explains how this NEW FORMULATION HIGH DENSITY PAINTERLY ACRYLIC (N.F.H.D.P.A.) is not 'doctored' with gel medium but has naturally the 'body of oils'. The caption to the reproduced painting describes the medium as 'atelier on canvas'. The accompanying Technical Notes stress that 'Atelier' has all the desired qualities of oil paint – its 'tactile meaty impasto' quality, its 'sharp definition', its retention of the 'vitality of gesture', and yet has all the practical advantages of acrylic paint, notably those of working speed and versatility. The technical emphasis throughout is that *Atelier looks like Oil Paint.*

Thus Market Research has already caught up with the local 'zeitgeist' – the

1. Russell Hoban, *"Riddley Walker"*, Picador London 1981, p.52
2. Artist's Statement, *Survey 16*, National Gallery of Victoria 1981
3. As the title of Sigmar Polke's celebrated painting *"Higher Beings command: Paint the Upper Corner Black"* (1969) suggests, this is neither a unique nor local phenomenon.
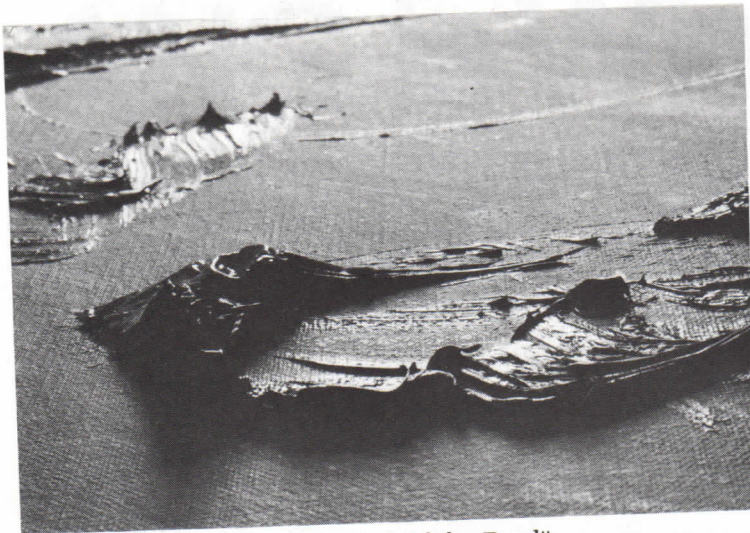
photograph: Paul Heisler

Marianne Baillieu, detail, "Island Of the Dead"
Oil on Canvas, 1983

semblance of expressionist painting, the return to figuration, the return to oil paint
and the necessity of texture. This new acrylic paint has been specially formulated
for local conditions but conceived in a 'popist' spirit, it ignores 'sincerity' (a quality
which is exclusively and inextricably embedded in the use and even the smell of
oil paint) and aims for the mere *simulation* of the 'look' of oil paint. Also it attempts
to interpolate its brand name 'atelier' as a common noun like 'xerox' into the
vocabulary of common usage.

The painting by Michael Johnson (in Chromacryl's reproduction) with its
flattened though still conspicuous texture is the paradigm of the 'photo-ready'
work – a work produced solely for the purposes of being reproduced and which
has no necessary existence beyond the photographic reproduction. This repro-
duction, however, is not inside the body of *Art and Australia* for long, but is
inserted into its ideological space as 'loose-leaf' and 'detachable' and is quick to
make its get-away after committing an act of terrorism. The makers of Atelier
acrylic 'oil' paint attempt to seduce those painters nervous about the new spirit in
painting to change their brand while *they*, the manufacturers, pursue their own
aesthetic and ideological goals. There is little doubt that Atelier N.F.H.D.P.A. will
be the prosaic and ironic art substance of the 80's leaving 'experimental' and 'post-
object' substances such as 'NU-ART' spray fixatif far behind.

Questions of 'finish' have always been of crucial importance in Australian Art – a
fact clearly recognised by the makers of Atelier. Thus Margaret Plant has pointed
out that it was 'finish' that divided local Melbourne artists in 1977 rather than
stylistic issues such as figuration versus abstraction or neo-realism versus
conceptualism. Her argument about 'finish', however, was aimed primarily at the
'abstract-expressionist' painters and she described their offerings as suave,
generously-scaled and decorative and "in the absence of aggression and sense of
challenge to the style in which they work, they have consolidated an audience and
declared themselves as the rear-garde."[4]

Fred Cress, after his popular show at Powell Street gallery in 1976, was singled out
for particular attention:

4.   Margaret Plant, "Quattrocento Melbourne: Aspects of Finish 1973-1977", *Studies in
   Australian Art*, University of Melbourne 1978
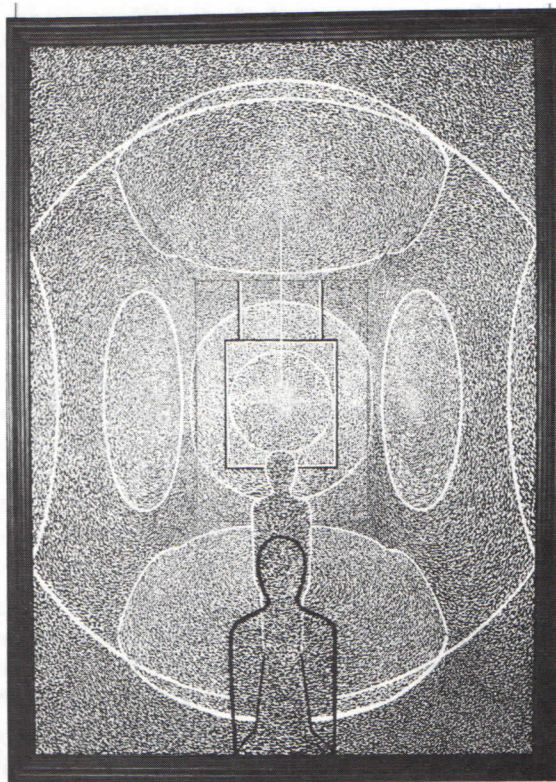
Peter Tyndall, "detail, A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/
someone looks at something", 1978

While it is comparatively easy for young Australian artists without an existing
artistic history to now partake of this burgeoning 'regional' tradition, it is still more
difficult for the formerly 'modernist' abstract painters of the 60's and 70's to do
likewise without compromising their integrity with an unabashed display of
opportunism. However they can at least shift their work in the relevant direction
by employing certain aspects of the exemplary model provided by Booth etc. Thus
in 1983, Fred Cress showed paintings at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney in
which the paint was appreciably thicker and in which the 'spontaneous' drips of
bygone days had been displaced by the expressive brushwork. Also the paintings
had become more ambiguous and were no longer entirely abstract or 'all-over'.
Now in some a triangulated motif (suggesting a biomorphic or architectural form)
dominated on a receding 'ground'. The palette also had changed, becoming more
'ominous' in its preference for blacks, reds and grays and in some works there
were even zig-zags.[10] These elegant paintings, like those of the complicit English
artist, John Walker (now resident in Australia) hovered somewhere *between*
figuration and abstraction but in conforming to the new demands of acceptable
'finish' they seemed to be participating in this new spirit in painting.

It is clear that Australian 'neo-expressionism' and its related manifestations
attempt to stress integrity and authenticity over irony and ambivalence. Also it
attempts to establish a sympathetic identification with its expressionist forebears

10. The use of the zig-zag as an apocalyptic sign of contemporaneity seems confined to
    Australia, but here it is as ubiquitous as Banksia Speciosa.
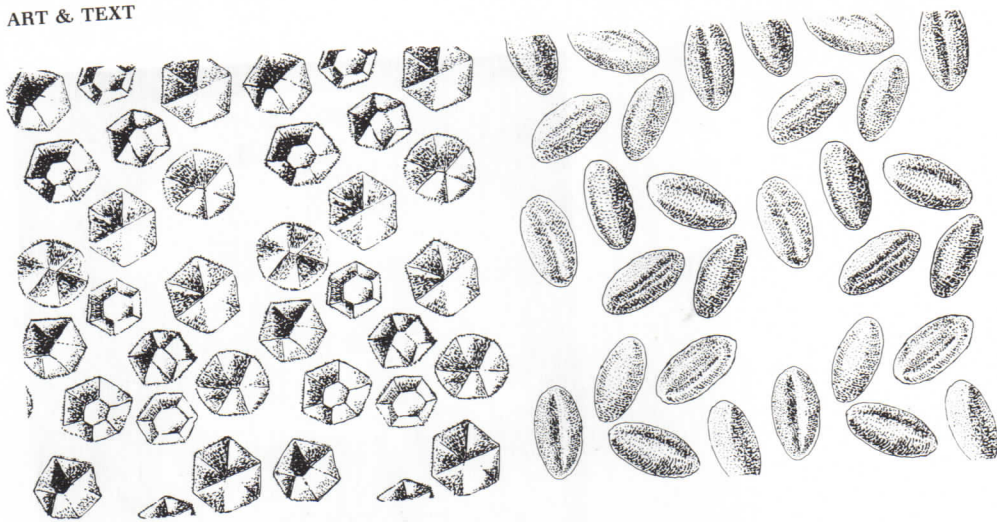
Peter Cripps, details, "Film Phenomena",
Mixed Media, 1982

rather than merely pillaging from them as part of a general strategy of stylistic quotation. In these features, and in emphasising individual and historical stylistic continuities over discontinuities, it is unworthy of comparison with the most significant work overseas to which it is nevertheless being compared.

Our local conception of 'neo-expressionism' does not seem to take into account the apt description of European and American counterparts as "perpetually oscillating between mutually incompatible attitudes or theories"[11] nor that it is sometimes referred to as 'post-conceptual' nor even that it shares common attitudes (eg. the idea of 'pre-created experience') and common strategies ('quotation' and 'simulation') with the trend which in Australia it is seen to oppose –i.e. "un-expressionism."[12]

'Neo-expressionism' in Europe and America employs inevitably a far wider textural range (both thicker *and* thinner) in its paintings than is generally found here. For example, to consider the thick end of the scale, in Australia we have not encountered anything comparable to the bitumen, sand and straw mixed in with Anselm Kiefer's dense oil paint nor the sheets of lead, iron tools and burnt logs supported by his paint surface; nor Nicola de Maria's suitcase suspended magically in a field of pure colour; nor Julian Schnabel's giant figures sketched in broom-sized brushstrokes on canvases primed with a bed of broken plates. These literal demonstrations of "How to Paint with a Hammer"[13] starkly contrast with our reticent use of the palette-knife. Our acceptable textural range is too easily *defined* by 'atelier'.

Who can forget the public indignation surrounding the purchase of Jackson Pollock's *"Blue Poles"* by the Australian National Gallery in 1975 for $1.2 million. The popular press ran sensationally embellished stories about how Pollock had painted *"Blue Poles"* in a drunken orgy with his semi-conscious cronies lending a helping hand (or foot) staggering around ankle-deep in paint and urine which was

11. Craig Owens, "Honor, Power and the Love of Women", *Art in America* January 1983, p. 9
12. Germano Celant. "From Alpha-Trainer to Subway", *Art & Text* No. 9 Autumn 1983, p.65
13. from Ian McKeever, *"Black and White. . . or how to paint with a hammer"*, Matts Gallery London 1982

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afloat with broken glass and cigarette butts. (This popular antipodean image of the spontaneous gesture was a far cry from the simplified transcriptions of our local 'abstract-expressionists' who turned this style into such a popular form of interior decor in the 60's and 70's.) Since the opening of the Australian National Gallery in October 1982, we can scrutinise the surface of *"Blue Poles"* directly and its 'flatness' is a revelation to us – the offensive fragment of broken glass protrudes no more than half a centimetre. It is as though our dislocation from the work up till now, since previously it was only available in reproduced form, hid an horrendous truth.

Perhaps what is lost in the mechanical reproduction of the work of art is not only the 'aura' of the original but also the tactile qualities of its surface. In Australia our knowledge and experience of art has until recently been almost entirely in this mediated form: the variety of available textures of art have all been mapped into the same smooth glossy paper and this surface has become our collective surrogate experience for that of the originals. We have thus become anaesthetised to texture. As a consequence it is those very tactile qualities which reproduction suppresses that we magnify and distort in our imaginations – hence our fear of texture. This also explains the conservative textural range in that contemporary painting which seeks to be 'ominous', 'magical', 'garish', 'sinister', 'dislocated', 'harsh', 'bizarre', 'gaudy', 'evil' but above all *'genuine'*.[14]

Fortunately, in Australian art there are still some tendencies to deviate from this prescribed textural norm and many of those artists willing to deviate have taken refuge in the *dematerialisation of texture* which the dot-screen permits – i.e. in the reproduction of the reproduction or in allied photographic processes. There is however also another alternative 'dot-screen' which unlike the precise and rigid screen of mechanical and electronic reproduction is *'degenerated'* in its structure and even resembles at times the planometric view of our semi-arid interior seen from high above as an eminently flat ground punctuated only by the sporadic and unfocussed dotting of scrubby mallees. This is the literal though abstracted image of the Australian landscape as presented to us in some of Fred Williams' paintings but it is also the 'view' implied in some entirely abstract works – for example those of Ralph Balson or more recently Gunter Christmann. This 'dot-screen' structure[15] however is most apparent in the works of the artists of Central Australia and the Western Desert who form the Papunya school of painters – artists such as Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Uta Uta Tjangala, Charlie

14. all from Memory Holloway, *"Young Melbourne Painters"* (catalogue) Monash University, Melbourne 1982
15. A 'degenerated' dot-screen is also *unconsciously* present in the work of certain younger artists where it is not the primary feature but is subordinated to other more conscious intentions. For example one thinks of the 'dot-screen' composed of pollen-grains in Peter Cripps' constructions *"Film Phenomena"* 1982 or Peter Tyndall's 'molecular' brushwork in his monochromatic series of paintings titled *"detail, A Person Looks at a Work of Art / someone looks at something"* (1976-1979). There is also John Young's constructivist chalk drawing on sandpaper which is not only 'molecular' (because of the grid of sand grains on the paper) but in which the image is 'carved' in reverse (by the absence of chalk) and resembles unintentionally an aboriginal rock-engraving. The 'dot-screen' structure is used in Marianne Baillieu's paintings of 'angels' – each 'angel' however as a palpable and formless 'glob' of paint (one tube of paint per angel) in its gross materiality contradicts its spiritual aspirations. And in Tony Clark's paintings of classical temple plans, the columns become dots forming a screen more akin to Papunya painting than to the classical architectural traditions from which they are derived.

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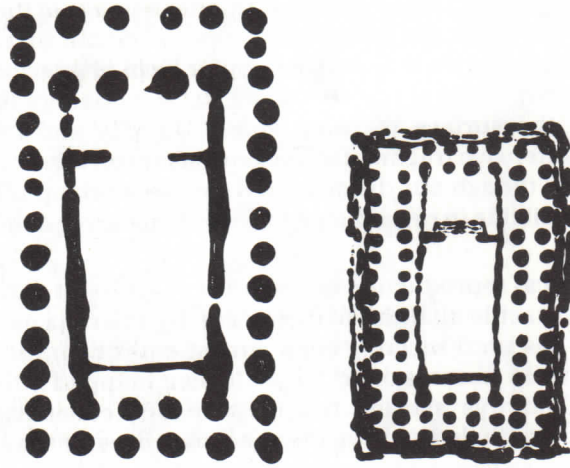
Tony Clark, "Peripteral and Dipteral Temples"
Oil on Paper, 1983

Tjapangati, Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula and Mick Namarari Tjapaltjami and others.

Recently it was suggested that painting might be thought of *not* in terms of a finite object but as a property of a continuous surface existing in time ad infinitum.

"I propose that painting be thought of as an enormous roll of diversified fabric woven in a single piece and unrolled in time and space. This surface extends for miles and miles but never appears on display. Its continuity is interrupted and broken up – cut into – to form innumerable fragments and portions of canvas (paintings), creating intervals and separations the understanding of which could greatly influence our way of thinking about and seeing painting, or for that matter continuity in the history of painting".[16]

The truth of this proposition is clearly evident if we look at a room full of Papunya paintings. The initial impression that each individual canvas is literally a fragment cut from the same cloth is in fact so overwhelming that it is only with the familiarity that comes from concerted and extended study that we begin to detect a whole range of pertinent differences between paintings. What unifies this body of work so dramatically is the pervasiveness of the 'dot-screen'.

In Papunya painting even though the 'dot-screen' is placed *over* the image, it tends to be a supple grid and thus accommodates and even defines the designs of the image below. Nevertheless because of the size of the dots and their continuity over the entire surface as a 'field' they tend to break down the image at the same instant as they define it: pictorial reality does not materialise out of the fusion of dots (as it does in mechanical and electronic reproduction techniques) but rather it dissipates (like an after-image or *hallucination*) into a cloud of dots. Because of the immediacy of this purely optical effect, the 'dot-screen' in Papunya painting frees the image from the materialism of texture. In this way the 'dot-screen' becomes the *image of dematerialisation.*

Papunya paintings have a very strong conceptual aspect and in several aspects can be identified with the dematerialised aspects of the Australian conceptual art of

16. Germano Celant, "Framed: Innocence or Gilt?", *Artforum* Summer 1982 p. 49, reitering Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateau.*
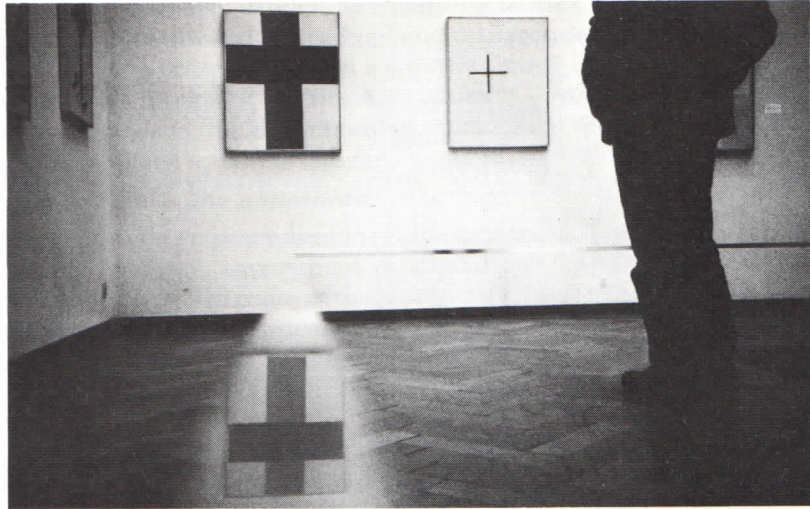
John Young, "A Local Mirage", 1982

the early 70's. Firstly Papunya paintings function as

> "mnemonics for the stories which are sung and which comprise Aboriginal lore and law and they are also cartographic mnemonics which inform and remind them of topography and proprietary rights to land according to Aboriginal law."[17]

Since these paintings originally existed in the ephemeral form of ground-paintings but now exist in the permanent form of paint on canvas and are therefore co-extensive and in competition with *other* conventional forms of painting, they could be described as 'post-conceptual' : the word made flesh.

Ironically, unlike the haptic anaesthesia of 'palette-knifed' expressionism (which conforms to the prescriptive textural limits of the paint manufacturers who recognised the existence of limits in the trajectory of recent painting, defined and concretised them), the papunya painters' relationship to their 'conceptual' painting – their image of dematerialisation (the dot-screen) is emphatically tactile. Thus the painters in explaining the significance of a painting will touch the painted surface and follow the tracks to the sites represented with the sensitivity of blind men reading Braille. It is interesting that the dematerialised Australian art of the early 70's, while it privileged the 'conceptual' over the 'visual', was never entirely 'mental' but rather shifted the emphasis away from the purely visual (corrupted) sensory mode to the other sensory modes (the auditory, haptic, olfactory, kinaesthetic etc.) in an attempt to re-purify optical vision. Thus in 1970 when Ian Milliss' celebrated piece *"Walk along this line"* (a length of masking tape installed on the floor, parallel and close to a wall with this title/instruction letrasetted on it) was shown in the Transfield Prize in Sydney and described as 'conceptual', he rightly disputed this claim pointing out that its purpose was to bring into play (in Art) the little used balance mechanism located in the middle ear. Considering that the first canvasboards were done in 1970-1, Papunya painting shares exactly the same historical period in Australia as conceptual art. Yet it was only in the latter part of this decade that these two eminently compatible

17. Andrew Crocker, "Mr Sandman Bring Me a Dream", Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd, Alice Springs 1981

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Richard and Fred Veilleux, psychic photograph 1968,
"Wandjina Rock Painting Superimposed
on a Reproduction of Leonardo's 'Last Supper' "

artistic movements came together when Tim Johnson as a conceptualist became one of Papunya painting's chief publicists.

The 'dot-screen' was not always present in Papunya painting. In fact it appeared only *after* a major crisis in the history of Papunya painting. Initially when Geoff Bardon[18] encouraged the transposition of traditional Central Australian and Western Desert art from 'ground-painting' or 'sand-paintings' onto canvas, the aboriginal artists depicted their ritual figures, animals, people and mythological ancestors without any censorship since the work was not painted for sale but for the pleasure of the activity and the recalled events and lore. At first these images were painted on darkly-primed backgrounds and there were hardly any dots to be seen in these paintings at all. However, when the work began to sell, the art changed. Other aboriginal people saw the work on display and were angered by what seemed to be a blatant display of certain aspects of the 'secret-sacred' men's world:

"Almost overnight as it were all detailed depictions of human figures, sacred and other 'dangerous' aspects were removed or modified in shape. In a related reaction backgrounds began to be painted-in rather than left stark. Patterns of straight lines,. arcs and hatching were common at first, but this soon changed to dots, thus eliminating elements used on some sacred objects. Although dots are part of some sacred paintings, they are rarely in themselves more than very generally significant, whereas arcs and barred lines have a strong association with certain sacred elements.[19]

Thus the 'dot-screen' appeared to fill the gap left by the sudden and traumatic withdrawal of the secret-sacred designs and images from the paintings. Now that he is aware of the possibility of the observation, appropriation and reproducibility of his sacred imagery by whites, the Papunya painter instead paints the 'pretty picture' or the 'easy story' – a satisfactory and true enough explanation but not a

18. See Geoff Bardon, *"Aboriginal art of the Western Desert"* Rigby, Adelaide 1969
19. R.J. Kimber, *"Mr Sandman Bring Me a Dream"*, Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd, Alice Springs 1981

deep 'law' story. The 'dot-screen' in Papunya painting is thus in addition to any other significance, a sign of not just the radical and transcendent superficiality of this art but also of its *invisibility*.[20] There is a supreme irony in this since it is an attitude convergent with the art of "White Aborigines"[21] – Australian 'unexpressionists' – those who embrace the 'dot-screen' of mechanical reproduction either directly or through its agent –photography.

An image with no texture is the apparition.

In 1982 John Young was using a procedure in which he would allow the camera to take its own picture. One such experiment produced a remarkable image: in a photograph taken in the Malevich room of the Stedjlik Museum in Amsterdam, one of Malevich's suprematist crosses appears reflected like a mirage on the floor of the room. This effect is the result of the camera having its automatic delayed shutter-release mechanism activated and then being placed 'blindly' and thus by chance on a metal railing at exactly the right point for which to create this illusion. Placed anywhere else but at this precise point and the illusion would have been broken. This result like the occurence of 'spontaneous images' on film seems to be an 'unconsciously structured'[22] event.

An even more remarkable example however of 'unaccountable' optical effects on photographs is a particular photograph taken by two Americans – Richard and Fred Veilleux of Waterville, Maine in 1968. When they took a photograph in their kitchen in July 1968 and developed the film they found a 'spontaneous image' superimposed over it. The image was later identified as an Australian 'wandjina' rock painting. An interesting footnote to this case was that after the image had been described by Professor Charles Lyle as a 'pagan last Supper' it was revealed that the image that the rock painting *obscured* in the photograph of the kitchen was a print of Leonardo's *"Last Supper"* which has been pinned to the wall.[23] This spontaneous superimposition is an ironic reversal when we consider the 'muscular Christianity' imposed on certain groups of Aborigines after white contact.

It is not wise however to put too much trust in these 'apparitions' for in the desert 'mirages' are dangerous – encouraging false hopes. But nevertheless while we are condemned to eternally subsist on the arid surface of this *'Island of the Dead'*, before we acquiese to the apocalypse of 'impasto' and simulated expression we should reclaim the 'dot-screen' and restore this 'cut-out portion of the fabric' back within the 'body' of modern Australian art.

20. "Invisibility" has been a common and successful artistic strategy in the art of the C20th. Most recently critical attention has focussed on the late works of De Chirico (executed between 1950-1962), particularly those which were thought to be the most 'invisible' of all – the precise (manual) quotations of certain earlier metaphysical paintings. See Achille Bonito Oliva *"Warhol verso de Chirico"* (catalogue) Rome 1982
21. See Paul Taylor, "Popism - The Art of White Aborigines", *On the Beach* (Sydney) No. 1 Autumn 1983, p. 30 and *Flash Art*, May 1983
22. See also Tim Johnson's book *"Coincidence"* pub. Tim Johnson Sydney
23. John Michell, Robert J.M. Rickard *"Phenomena"*, Thames & Hudson 1977, frontspiece.

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