

IMANTS TILLERS

IN PERPETUAL MOURNING *

"Australia is the dumping ground for the rubbish of all the earth."

— *The Skull* (Ross May)

In Australia the experience of works of art through mechanical reproduction always precedes their direct experience. For example, Enzo Cucchi's painting, *The wind of the black roosters*, 1982, bought recently by the Australian National Gallery was reproduced in *Flash Art*¹ before it could be seen first hand in Canberra. The caption "Courtesy Canberra Museum", however, seems to deny the reality of "Australian National Gallery" banishing Cucchi's masterpiece (if it has to be in Australia) to an entirely fictitious repository of art. For Australians too, there is some comfort in this oversight - for the acknowledged presence of a Cucchi in Australia would evoke feelings of disbelief. It would undermine our sense of protection from 'originals' - from their aura, their surface and their authority. The dot-screen of mechanical reproduction renders all images equivalent, interchangeable, scale-less and surface-less; but above all it makes them far more susceptible to local readings. Thus another of Cucchi's works in reproduction, *Fierce painting*, 1981², strangely echoes the distinctive profile of Joern Utzon's Sydney Opera House and we all recognize his desolate 'barbaric landscapes' not as prophetic images of the future but as the severely eroded landscape of Australia's present.

On 15th August 1983, the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried the following report:

"Jackson Pollock's 'Blue Poles' was reproduced in New York recently to mark the 27th anniversary of Pollock's death. Artist Mike Bidlo recreated the work on 132 masonite tiles and then gave them away to onlookers. Asked why he chose 'Blue Poles', Bidlo claimed that the canvas had helped change the Government of Australia. When the Australian people found out what the Government had paid for it, they were outraged. They threw the Government out! Pollock's painting was bought for \$1.3m by the Whitlam Government in 1973."

This report is remarkable for two reasons, firstly the supreme almost mystical power it attributes to a work of art (the power to change governments) and the inversion of the normal state of affairs - that of artists outside of Australia 'recreating' works of art that are here.

Indeed the 'aura' surrounding *Blue Poles* is such that even when attempting to talk about any other work, say for example, Shusaku Arakawa's painting *Out of Distance/Out of Texture*, 1978 which is also on display in the Australian National Gallery, it is difficult not to mention Pollock's masterpiece. *Blue Poles* with its latticework of paint seems to act as a vortex into which all other works are drawn. Thus we cannot avoid seeing Arakawa's painting as the accumulation of a series of superimposed layers of paint. One layer is in the form of a text, another in the form of perspective lines, another in the form of an

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architectural plan (a living room) and yet another in the form of rotating lines which appear to be forming themselves into volumes (broken columns) which might even be the tentative visualisations of the point of consciousness. There may even be other layers. The rather mechanical construction of these layers in Arakawa's work, however, is in direct contrast to the loose intertwining of gestural, gossamerlike threads of paint in *Blue Poles*.

Or we might consider the New Zealand artist Colin McCahon's painting *Victory over death 2*, 1970 in which the starkly monochrome and monumental typography of the words "I AM" seems to echo New Zealand's mountainous topography. This reading of McCahon's painting is determined by our realisation that *Blue Poles*' viewpoint is aerial and flat (like the viewpoint in Papunya painting)³ and echoes the enormous expanses of Australia's interior - its shifting veils of turbulence seen from high above, hypnotic and unfocused, through dust and haze.

Cucchi's *The wind of the black roosters* no doubt will eventually take its place in orbit as yet another satellite of *Blue Poles* and its meaning, too, will be altered and overlaid by the meanings that emanate from that haloed fragment of 'modernism' which sits uncomfortably here on the other side of the earth. Like the sole surviving fragment of Western culture in Russell Hoban's apocalyptic vision of the future *Riddley Walker* (ie. the tapestry depicting the legend of St Eustace), *Blue Poles* engulfs us all in its impenetrable veils and mysteries. In a culture of counterfeit images, the direct perception of a work such as *Blue Poles* produces a devastating effect of cultural inferiority in the viewer. The following passage from *Riddley Walker* might even be the literal response of local artists (certainly the accent is right) when confronted by the enormity of the cultural gap:

*"Now you're talking jus like me I don't know how many times I've said that. Now you see the woal thing what I'm getting at its why I'm all ways strest and straint I'm just a woar out man. Riddley we aint as good as them befor us. Weve come way way down from what they ben time back way back. May be it wer the barms what done it poysening the lan or when they made a hoal in what they callit the O Zoan."*⁴

The problem with *Blue Poles* is of course that it is concrete proof of our provincialism. It is one of the few art objects of indisputable quality and presence which can be apprehended directly here in Australia. In a sense it undermines the second-hand reality of the mechanically reproduced image which otherwise saturates our consciousness determining our view of ourselves and of the external world.

As pointed out ten years ago, provincialism appears primarily as 'an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values.'⁵ But most of us treat such a projection as if it were a construction of reality when in fact it is a culturally relative viewpoint. The patterns of provincialism are deeply etched in Australia.

Typically, relentless provincialism is marked by the tensions between two antithetical positions: a defiant urge to localism (a claim for the possibility and validity of "making good original art right here") and a reluctant recognition that the generative innovations in art and the criteria for standards of 'quality', 'originality', interest, 'forcefulness' etc. are determined externally. But far from encouraging "innocent art of naive purity, untainted by too much thinking", provincialism in fact produces highly self-conscious art "obsessed with the problem of what its identity ought to be."⁶

Waves of hope that the provincialist bind can be broken recur cyclically in Australian art. In

the 1920s 'nativeness' was celebrated. In the late 1940s a number of painters (later called the 'Antipodeans') placed their faith in a localism pursued with a sharp awareness of European traditions. During the 1950s and 1960s, following the influence of Abstract Expressionism, hope grew for the possibility of an avant-garde 'breakthrough'. In 1974 in the 'inventiveness encouraged by open form sculpture, process, environmental and performance art'⁷, and during the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was placed in an attempt by some artists and curators to blend the exoticism of Aboriginal culture with certain manifestations of contemporary art⁸. This artificial blending culminated in the French curator Suzanne Pagé's exhibition *From Another Continent: the Dream and the Real* 1983 at ARC Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.⁹

Today, in 1984, we place our hope in what the English critic John Roberts has termed "the re-emergence of a strong urban-based art, orientated towards mimicry and deconstruction of the codes and signs of consumerism."¹⁰ These sentiments invite us to exaggerate our natural tendencies towards mimicry, to emphasise rather than hide our provincialism, even to bathe ostentatiously in it. For once the call from the other side of the world is congruent with our real cultural condition. It seems that at some moment each succeeding generation of artists in Australia expresses the sentiment "Australia is now part of the art scene"¹¹, only to later recognise their hopeless invisibility and powerlessness. By employing strategies of mimicry, deconstruction and even hyper-conformism,¹² 'invisibility' and 'powerlessness' can now be turned to our advantage. With this realisation we are also witnessing an inversion of the normal patterns of art production in Australia, rooted as they are in low self-esteem. The shift is from the hitherto pervasive condition of 'anorexia nervosa' (i.e. small, tentative, self-effacing and ultimately self-destructive outputs) to a condition resembling 'bulimia' (binge-eating and vomit). In the latter case, we see this as an over-excessive consumption of images and their regurgitation in a manner which is psychologically motivated and completely (often defiantly) unrelated to those market forces (the proverbial 'hunger for pictures') which seem to have stimulated art production in Europe and America.

The wide-ranging image consumption and regurgitation results not in the death of the author but in his or her apparent fragmentation. Wolfgang Max Faust has called this process the "wilful dissociation of subjectiveness and style". The image has become the site of a transient fascination that represents not the unity of one ego but a multiple subjective view. Each painting becomes a battleground, an arena of conflict where "the artist's visions and longings face a showdown with his or her knowledge of art history. A momentary irritation caused by some picture from a magazine or television ad, an art book or a dream battles with the need to make an image that is authentically of and about the self."¹³

Dick Watkins is in many ways the pioneer of this tendency in Australia and he has for some time been engaged in the digestion and regurgitation of Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock. Recently he came up with another Pollock which he ominously entitled *City of the Living Dead plus Zombie Holocaust*, 1982-3.¹⁴ This title reminds us that when there is no room left in hell, the dead will rise up and walk the earth. In other words when authority ceases to be representative beware the dispossessed lest they rise up in revolt against everything held sacred to the prevailing order and inherit the ruins of a shattered ideology.¹⁵ In *Riddley Walker* it is only the dispossessed who survive the nuclear holocaust and, by virtue of their survival, it is their interpretation (no matter how pathetically misconstrued) of the remaining

fragments of civilisation on which the new culture is built. Cultural meaning is reforged by the bricoleurs of the post-industrial, post-nuclear age. As George Miller's popular films, *Mad Max* and *Mad Max II (The Road Warrior)* seem to suggest, Australia is already the landscape of the future and it is no coincidence that the degenerated language in *Riddley Walker* echoes the all-too familiar strains of the Australian accent. In this Land of the Living Dead our 'strategies of mimicry' are no more than adaptations of primitive principles of magic, particularly the Law of Similarity whereby the magician implies that he can produce any effect he desires by merely imitating it.¹⁶ Some Aboriginal folklore already confirms Australia as the land of the dead: "*If the spirits stray from their path to their totemic country on island of the dead, the white cockatoos alone will see them and give a piercing cry of warning. Their cry screams out across Arnhem Land today as they continue to warn the living of the presence of the spirits in the bush.*"¹⁷

The recent and brutal history of Australia is strewn with many corpses. For example the term 'isles of the dead'¹⁸ referred to those islands off the western coast of Australia where Aboriginal tribes, often sick and dying from their lack of resistance to the most harmless of white man's diseases, were herded together with no regard for their totemic differences and left to die. Another island, Tasmania, is the infamous site of a near genocide.

This social history is of course a metaphor for our cultural present. While the dot-screen of mechanical reproduction renders all images equivalent, interchangeable, scale-less and surface-less, the consumption and regurgitation or 're-creation' of these images reinvests them with an aura, surface, substance and scale entirely different from their corresponding 'originals'. In this sense mechanical reproduction is a purgatory or limbo for image patterns. Like disembodied souls floating textureless in books, they are waiting to be reborn, to be recreated, to feel the actuality of their reality. The mechanical reproduction of images is a form of death (crucifixion)¹⁹ - when resurrected onto new surfaces these images remain 'stigmatised' by the marks of their death. Thus 're-created', paintings often appear unnaturally monochrome, faded like poor xeroxes, 'out-of-register', excessively grainy or to carry residual traces of a dot-screen.

The possibilities of painting in Australia in 1984 allow the collision of several image patterns onto one surface - 'worlds in collision' where the worlds might be 'xerox satellites'. In this sense our culture is an Island of the Dead and our paintings facilitate the Return of the Living Dead. As our work too passes into reproduction, we realise that our painting, like our cultural condition, is destined to be a kind of 'perpetual mourning'.

*"I never sung no beginning because you wont never fynd no beginning its long gone and far pas. What ever youre after yowl never fynd the beginning of it thats why yowl all ways be too late. Onlyes thing youwl ever fynd is the end of things. What ever happens itwl be what you dint want to happen. What ever dont happen thatwl be the thing you wantit. Take your choosing how you like youwl get what you dont wont."*²⁰

Notes

- 1 Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova, "Interview with Enzo Cucchi", *Flash Art*, Nov. 1983, p.20.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. 16.
- 3 Papunya is the Aboriginal settlement where a now flourishing aboriginal art movement in Western materials began in the early 1970s.
- 4 Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker*, Picador 1982, p.120.
- 5 Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem", *Artforum*, Sept. 1974, p.54.
- 6 Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, rev. ed. Harmondsworth, England 1970, p.314.
- 7 Terry Smith, *op. cit.*, p.57.
- 8 For a discussion of the drawbacks of this attitude, see Imants Tillers, "Locality Fails", *Art & Text*, no.6, winter 1982.
- 9 See Jill Montgomery, "Australia - The French Discovery of 1983", *Art & Text*, nos. 12 & 13, 1983-4.
- 10 John Roberts, "Principles of Motion", *Art Monthly*, Feb. 1984, p.17.
- 11 For example see Royston Harpur, "An Important Academy", *The Field*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 1968, p.92.
- 12 See John Young and Terry Blake "On Some Alternatives to the Code in the Age of Hyperreality: the Hermit and the City-Dweller", *Art & Text*, no.2, winter 1981, p.7.
- 13 Wolfgang Max Faust, "'Du hast keine Chance. Nutze sie!' With it and against it: Tendencies in Recent German Art", *Artforum*, Sept. 1981, p.39.
- 14 Exhibited at Pinacotheca, Melbourne and Yuill/Crowley, Sydney in 1983.
- 15 Glyn Banks, "Mulheimer Freiheit: The Return of the Living Dead", *Art Monthly*, Feb. 1984.
- 16 J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Macmillan 1970, p.14.
- 17 Jennifer Isaacs (ed.), *Australian Dreaming - 40,000 years of Aboriginal History*, Lansdowne Press 1980, p.229.
- 18 Daisy Bates, *Passing of the Aborigines*, Butler and Tanner, London 1938, p.93.
- 19 Some artists, recognising this, have begun to make paintings which attempt to defy mechanical reproduction. For example Sigmar Polke's "Heroes in the Air", *Artforum*, December 1983, pp.52-53.
- 20 Russell Hoban, *op.cit.*, p.147.