



# ART MONTHLY AUSTRALIA

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LIFT A STONE AND YOU WILL FIND ME  
CLEAVE THE WOOD AND I AM THERE



NOT BE OVERCOME  
NEVER BE ABLE



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CONTENTS

2	Editorial
3	Antony Gormley <i>Inside Australia</i> Hilary Maddocks
6	An inquiring mind: An interview with Rupert Myer Philippa Kelly
10	Dear Hilary
11	Letters
12	Books  Benjamin Genocchio <i>Fiona Foley: Solitaire</i> Kim Mahood
14	Seven beauties in Albany and Perth Marie Bonnal
16	Ian Burn and Imants Tillers in conversation Introduction by Ann Stephen
21	<i>Pierre Bonnard: Observing nature</i> Richard Larter
24	Art round-up: Darwin and the Northern Territory Maurice O'Riordan
28	<i>Blood on the spinifex</i> Roger Taylor
32	Ten Days on the Island Daniel Thomas
35	Artnotes
52	Stop Press

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**Front cover:** Gary France, Head of Percussion at the ANU School of Music with students from the School, collectively DrumMatix, performing in front of Imants Tillers *Mexico etcetera*, 2001, at the opening of the *Synergies* exhibition, Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, and launch of Fusion, a year of activities at the Australian National University exploring the merging of creative practices and intellectual currents, coordinated by the National Institute of the Arts and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, on 27 March. Photo Katie Hayne.

Opinions expressed in this magazine are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the publisher and editors, and readers are invited to make up their own minds on issues debated in *Art Monthly*.  
All letters are welcome.

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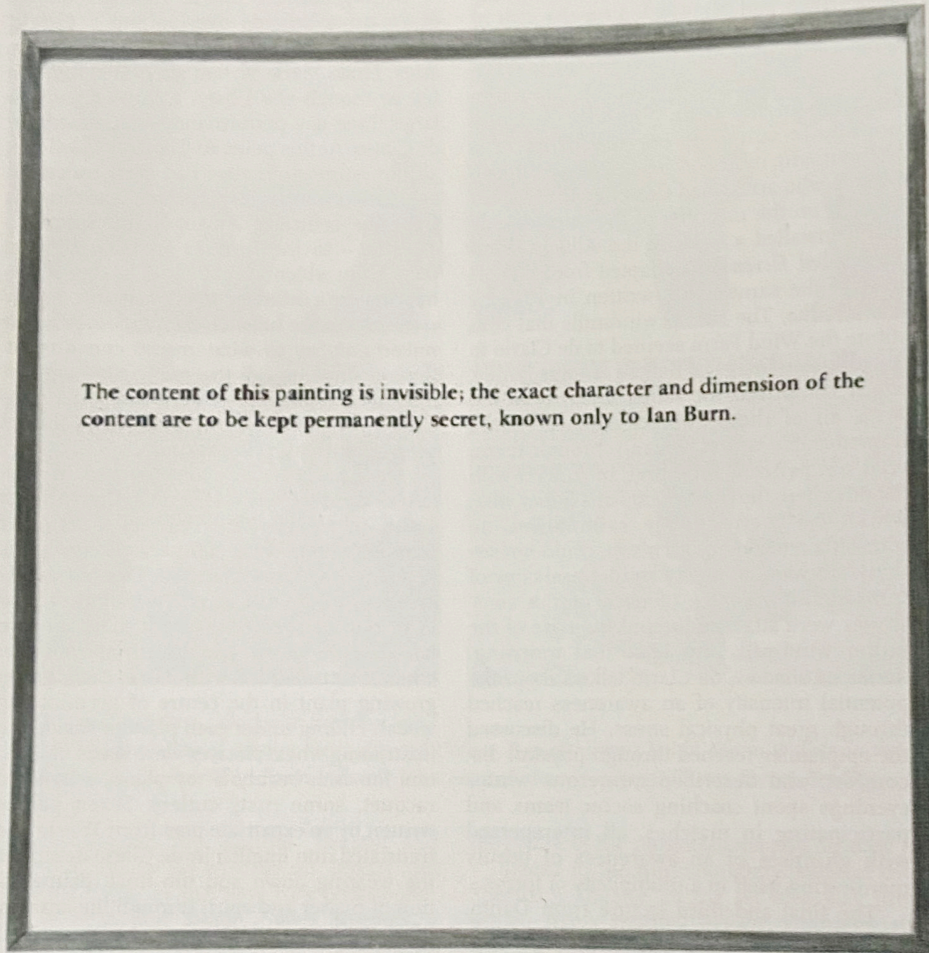




# Ian Burn and Imants Tillers in conversation

Introduction by Ann Stephen

The content of this painting is invisible; the exact character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to Ian Burn.



Mel Ramsden, *Secret painting*; Ian Burn, 1967-68, oil on canvas, gelatin silver photograph. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Ten years ago Ian Burn interviewed Imants Tillers. Their conversation revolved around Mel Ramsden's *Secret painting*, 1967-68, now regarded as a classic work of early Conceptual art, which Tillers had appropriated and remade as *Secret painting/Red square* in 1987. Tillers' version was one of the works Burn had selected for the exhibition, *Looking at seeing & reading*. Like their talk, that show linked artists across several generations and continents whose self-reflective art was 'undone by the way it turns in on itself, whose act of turning in on itself becomes an outward expression to the world, becomes its social and political face.'<sup>1</sup>

Their conversation in April 1993 was in fact the second time they had interviewed one another. Two decades earlier Tillers and Jennifer Slatyer had met with Burn, during his visit to Australia in October 1972. At that time Burn was working in New York as part of Art & Language, with his long-time collaborator, Mel Ramsden, amongst others, and Tillers was one of the young Australian artists and writers who were receptive to the challenges posed by the first wave of Conceptual art. Tillers was writing an architectural thesis titled *The beginner's guide to oil painting*, concerned with the shift 'in the role of the artists from the producer of data to the amplifier ... of systems rather than objects...'<sup>2</sup> He singled out Art & Language for its capacity to 'make propositions about art... [through] the construction of a number of alternative frameworks' though he voiced 'some criticism of their method from philosophical viewpoints as well as for its communicative value'. That first interview was not taped. Burn's visit home was a watershed in many ways, and, on his return to New York, Art & Language began to look at ways to theorise 'provincialism', but that's another story. The

1993 interview, which Burn cited in the catalogue essay for *Looking at seeing & reading*, is published here for the first time.

**Imants Tillers:** I decided to make a work based on Mel Ramsden's *Secret painting* 1967-68 for several reasons. First of all, I wanted to make a work which was like doing an early piece of Conceptual art again, given that the emphasis changes by doing it again. Secondly, I was attracted to the subject of the work itself: the idea of secrecy engaging the viewer, the idea that the content is inaccessible and the work is the viewer's reaction. But Mel Ramsden's original idea of secrecy changed in the making of my version, as I was working from only a black-and-white reproduction. I wasn't sure of colour, for example, so I made the black square a red

ochre, like an Aboriginal colour, to give it a reference in that direction.

**Ian Burn:** Of course, in Mel's work it was black, as a reference in the direction of Ad Reinhardt. But that reference is significant for the interpretation of the work. One of the things about Mel's *Secret painting* is that you do have to look at the painting, because the possibility is always present that you may be able to see whatever is being claimed is secret. Consequently, a tension develops between seeing as a phenomenological possibility and the idea of secrecy which implies there's nothing to see. If there is in fact nothing to see, then the work opens up to endless imitations or replications, since there will be as little to see in the original as in any replication. But that can't be assumed, as long as uncertainty remains.

**IT:** True, but the fact of working from a reproduction rather than the original introduces other possibilities. If I'd been looking at Mel Ramsden's actual work, there would have been no point doing it again. It's too specific. Being unaware of the qualities of the work, of the kind of surface and so on, I was forced to make decisions about it and so the work opened up further.

**IB:** But what happens to the prospect of phenomenological engagement produced by the possibility-of-seeing-something in Mel's work? And doesn't that presuppose the experience of a unique or original object, which is distinct from the experiential detachment or displacement associated with a replication?

**IT:** Maybe, but the point is my version has its own qualities. What remains the same is a certain idea, which was Mel's original idea, but how it is experienced it is different. In a way I have little idea of the experiential quality, I've no concept of the materials, how flat they are, how the writing is applied. My version was fabricated in a factory to specifications I provided – and I didn't secrete anything under the vitreous enamel, even though the process could have made that possible.

Also, while the text still refers to 'this painting', the fact that the surface of my work is vitreous enamel precludes its reading in terms of the physical properties of a painting. So there's already a rupture in its reading as a painting, prior to the 'withdrawal of content'. For Mel's *Secret painting* to work successfully in the terms you're referring to, I think it's critical that it's painted canvas on stretcher.

**IB:** Okay, it's playing with notions about a painting tradition. But before Mel started those works, he'd been preoccupied with making paintings more closely related to Reinhardt – for example, in the works titled *Three black rectangles*, he painted three concentric rectangles with the same black paint, but separately, so only the residue of the act of separately painting the rectangles allows them to be visible. Anyone acquainted with Mel's work in that period knows there's a possibility of something being perceivable in the *Secret paintings*. But that's probably the last moment when that kind of expectation

can be exploited, with Mel or anyone else's work. So the work can be replicated but the historical moment can't.

But let's take another example. I'm also curious about your use of Jasper Johns' drawing for his painting *0 through 9* 1961 which is in the Tate Gallery. It's a work which had a profound impact on me in the mid-sixties, and I still find it fascinating. It influenced other artists too. I recall that Vito Acconci published a magazine in New York back in 1969 which was also called *0 to 9*, as a sort of homage to that work of Johns.

**IT:** An initial reason the Johns drawing interested me was because my canvas-board panel work is partly to do with counting, with each panel numbered in order of production, from zero to infinity. *0 through 9* seemed to be linked. But I also like its graphic quality, the way you can only just discern that the numerals are all there, while it's impossible to separate them out.

**IB:** You can read each numeral, but it takes a considerable effort, and after you've gone through that process it's as if you've gained nothing. Perceiving it is like a process of retrieval – seeing what you can read and reading what you can see.

It's also a somewhat curious work for Johns at that time: its lost-and-found edges give it an almost Cubist quality. In fact, in some writing about Jasper Johns, it is a work which tends to be downplayed or even overlooked. With the numerals superimposed rather than laid out in sequence, I think it's seen to lose some of its Pop quality. Maybe it's closer to Cage's notions of indeterminacy than to Pop. What interested me about the work was the way it managed to position the viewer in conflict between looking and reading, which encourages a critical awareness about what your eyes are doing.

This is why I found it curious that you had worked with both Mel Ramsden's work and the Johns' drawing, since both works are interrogating the visual in quite specific and profound ways. Each in a different way locates itself about borders of perception. So, assuming that is part of what attracted you to those works, how might they relate to your other work?

**IT:** It's as if those works continually shift between modes, between a purely perceptual and a cognitive mode. However, the sorts of images I choose don't conform to a single character, rather they are defining the parameters within which I want to work. I do works like those to establish particular reference points within a broader sense of my work.

I'm not sure that many other works function in quite the same way. I showed you a small Kiefer painting I'd used, and also a small Art & Language painting – with works like those, which are more or less 'straight' appropriations, you get something different happening. If you know the original work then you recognise it, and you experience a split second of recognition and of uncertainty about whether it's the work or not.

**IB:** Like the experience of walking around a

museum you haven't visited before. You tend to recognise the works but not look at them.

**IT:** And the recognition is in your seeing, at that moment it constitutes your seeing. So there's a range of my works which exploit that momentary dilemma before the realisation that it's not a Kiefer or an Art & Language painting.

**IB:** There's an early comment by Johns that what interested him about targets, flags, numbers and so on was that they were things the mind already knows, that they are things which are seen but not looked at.

**IT:** There's a strong similarity there. When you see a target or a flag, you say yes that's just a target or a flag. But if it's a Johns' flag, you have to look again because it's a painting and not a flag. The more you look, the less it's like a flag.

**IB:** But it still is a flag. A flag is simply the design, not a piece of fabric. If you paint the design onto a canvas, you're making a flag, even though it may be unusual materials to make a flag from. So it's a painting and a real flag – or at least about as real as a flag can ever get. Similarly, if you paint a number or letter onto a canvas then it's the real thing, since it's the design which is the number or letter.

**IT:** That suggests connections between appropriation and Johns' work – the dilemma of recognition, the slippage, which are elements I like to use in my work. In many ways Johns really has appropriated the American flag; you see a catalogue of his work and there are the flags and it seems to say, here is Jasper Johns, the American artist, advertising America ...

**IB:** And with a bit of naivety on his part about that. Like the comments where he implied that things like numbers, targets and flags are all just neutral.

**IT:** But that can be partly true. Of the artists I use myself, I feel a neutrality towards their work. It's hard to explain, I don't try to promote their work, I see it as just an image I can employ in a certain way, part of an environment of images from which I feel a degree of detachment. I tend to use things which I like, but I don't feel a mission to promote this or that person's work, or even to un-promote it.

**IB:** A work like *Secret painting* proposes its own content as a secret, as if asking the viewer: 'is there anything there to see?' It seems to me that, by appropriation, you are saying: 'it doesn't matter whether there's anything there or not'. This reduces the work to simply a sign for itself, or for a moment in art history – in other words, your work intentionally fails to signify the failure-to-signify of the original work. Is implying 'it doesn't matter' part of that detachment or 'neutrality' you are referring to?

**IT:** Partly. Some people have said I produce parodies, but I don't feel strongly enough about what I use to make parodies.

**IB:** Yet you do have a strong awareness of a difference between your work and the work of the artists which it uses. Can you say where



this comes from? For example, when Jasper Johns was making his American flag paintings, he was making them as flags but also including traces of other things, bits of newspapers, photographs, embedding these within his surfaces of wax encaustic making reference like de Kooning and Pollock. In other words, he's saying they are about being flags ... *and* about being other things as well. They are flags and at the same time more complicated than flags – more specific, if you like – because the encounter with the flag is mediated by those subtle, seemingly random elements. This allows some viewers, I guess, to distance themselves somewhat from the overtness of the symbolism. In other words, Johns makes you aware it's a flag in every sense of being a flag, but that it's never just a flag.

When you're working with another artist's work, do you have as deliberate a sense of constructing difference as Johns? Or do you tend to let the act of replication itself produce the difference?

**IT:** This varies considerably. There are in fact a range of kinds of difference. In about 1978 or 1979, I made a couple of works using a photographic process, of Tom Roberts' and Hans Heysen's paintings. With those, the difference between the originals and my works was ambiguous to the point that my work could stand in for the Heysen original. It was a photographic technique called Superscan and it painted onto canvas, but the scale would have been wrong and the physical process of the painting and its resolution would have been wrong, and these constituted the difference. But with work since then there has always been a more self-conscious difference – in the first place, my works are always on small panels, so there is always a semblance of a grid through it, even in reproduction. Then there are also the works which combine a number of obviously different references.

In a way, the *Secret painting* is a bit like the early Heysen work, since in reproduction there aren't a lot of differences to the Mel Ramsden. Then there are also the Pollock works – from a distance they look just like Pollocks, yet the process is quite contradictory. They are done with masking tape and the shapes cut out with a scalpel. So there are a variety of kinds of differences that I'm working with.

**IB:** Mel's *Secret painting* evolved partly from Reinhardt's black paintings, with their repetition of the same cross form. The viewer knows what to look for, despite the difficulty often of seeing the cross. You know what to look for and where, and can almost will yourself into seeing it. Thus the possibility of seeing becomes as important as any actual seeing, though it doesn't displace or substitute for that. That was Mel's starting-point in developing something which could be argued to be inherent in Reinhardt's work, even though Reinhardt would never have followed that path. The point I'm making is that *Secret painting* interprets Reinhardt's work in a particular way.

Within the types of difference that you're

working with, do you ever view your process as interpreting (or re-interpreting) another work?

**IT:** I'm unsure of the extent to which I'm interpreting the other works. However, with the artists I do take work from, I am in some ways commenting on their practices as artists. De Chirico interests me, for example, because there are an enormous number of 're-done' works, re-done as later works. Of *Disquieting muse*, there were about twenty versions, produced over a sixty year period. That aspect of de Chirico I'm building on myself – and I'm aware of that aspect of de Chirico's work when I'm doing, say, the Pollock works.

I'd have to add that choosing Mel Ramsden's *Secret painting* isn't really an arbitrary choice. I'm interested in his motivation and I'm also interested in that work as a reference point for other issues, as well as using it literally as a subject for my own work. The same could be said for my interest in Colin McCahon – how could such a regionally located artist produce such powerful work?

**IB:** Something which has struck me about works of yours I've seen is a particular kind of engagement with the visual – *as visual* – rather than as text or anything else. In contrast, I look at, say, Juan Davila's work and find little that interests me on that visual level – his work is not visually intelligent, its intelligence functions only on a literary or academic level. The work is sometimes clever, witty, occasionally technically accomplished, but pedestrian on a visual level. Whereas Johns' flag paintings, despite (or maybe because of) the banality of their subject, have an intelligence which functions visually. And, while Mel's *Secret painting* seems to want to deny the visual, it is in fact working scrupulously at the edges of the visual and it is this sense of the visual which gives the work its acuity.

**IT:** That sense of the visual is important to me. On the other hand, I also find I encounter constraints on the visual simply on a practical level – working constantly on small panels determines what kind of imagery I can in fact employ, and which will work. I haven't, for example, thought about doing an Ad Reinhardt black painting, but on the other hand, come to think of it, a Reinhardt may in fact work.

**IB:** The simulation of a Reinhardt painting on small panels would have a marked effect on the reading one anticipates with his work. But that raises another matter, an important one, about competence. How, in practice, do you recognise a successful appropriation or simulation from an unsuccessful one?

**IT:** That's a fair question since they don't all work equally well. But it's the same question which can be addressed to any painter about how they decide which are successful works, which is to do with how the various elements work together. In my case, the strategy in itself doesn't automatically guarantee success.

**IB:** What I'm getting at is that there is a diversity of attitudes, and of competences,

which can be masked within the act of appropriation. Some of these may be quite dumb, even stupid, while the strategy masks that to a large degree. At what point then does the competence, and even the intelligence of the strategy, become evident?

**IT:** Within my overall output, there are quite different sub-bodies of work. With my Pollock appropriations, for example, it's fairly easy to figure out which ones work best as appropriations, though they may not necessarily work best as Pollocks. The ones which work best are those with the greatest tension between the gesture and its translation into my mode. Where it works less well is probably where the gesture is less prominent. In other words, it has a lot to do with the original Pollock work and how that interacts with the process in my work. Often they are ones which are not particularly recognisable as Pollocks, for example, those which are denser and more figurative. Of course, if they fail that's okay, because they are all on standard panels and I recycle them, I just put them into another work.

**IB:** A bit like the early works of Sidney Nolan where he often painted one picture over the top of another, sometimes turning it upside down and invariably leaving bits of the first picture showing through, which disorients the reading of the final painting.

**IT:** I like reusing the panels of rejected works to leave bits of the first work visible. I don't like all the labour to go to waste. It also gives you something unpredictable, elements you couldn't have set out consciously to have in the work.

**IB:** With those works which are close replications of an original, part of your aim appears to be to leave a viewer temporarily in a state of uncertainty. That suggests it is important for the viewer to know it is an appropriation.

**IT:** Firstly, the condition of undecidability is important on many levels of my work. For example, within my working method I always feel that my next work can be anything, decided at any time, I don't feel limited to any strand or kind of work. It's also important that uncertainty arises for the viewer, which implies a number of different and competing levels of response. And the people who don't know something is an appropriation are as much a part of my audience as the people who are aware ...

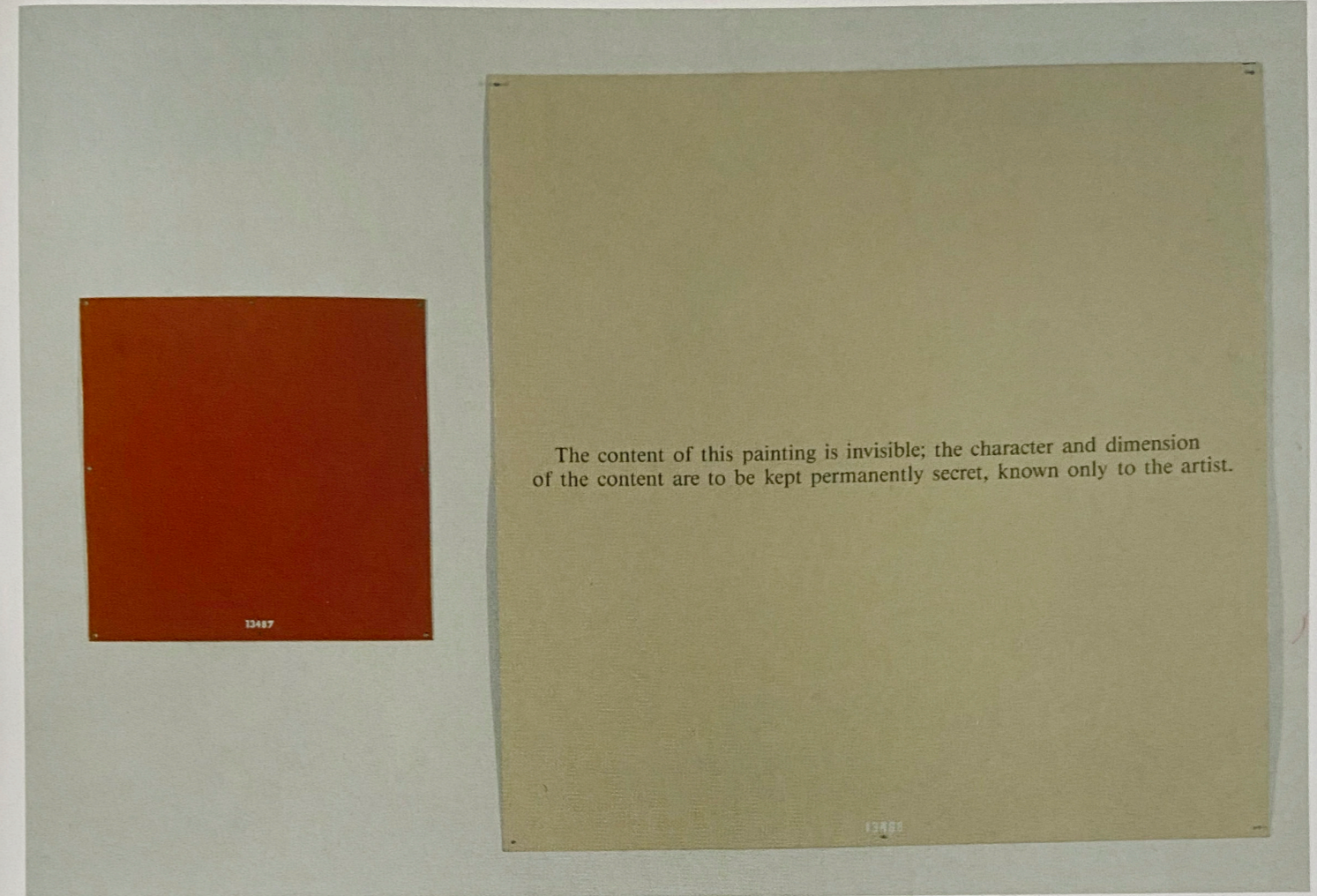
**IB:** Which audience do you prefer?

**IT:** Well, I don't try to hide the fact that they are appropriated images and make sure it's stated the works are from somewhere else.

**IB:** But, for the unknowledgeable viewer, your competence as an artist does get confused with the competence of the artist of the originating work.

**IT:** That's simultaneously a strength and a failing. Ethically, I guess I find the informed viewer the preferred audience. I do value the sense of detachment or distance between the competence referred to and the competence produced.

On the other hand, what I also find is that



Imants Tillers, *Secret painting/Red square*, 1987, vitreous enamel on two steel panels (nos.13487-13488). Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

informed viewers tend to ignore my competence. They recognise the reference of the work and don't look at how my works are actually done. They see it as all being the source's competence. That's where I think it can be instructive to see my work alongside the originals, so that viewers do have to deal with both competences.

**IB:** That begs a larger question about appropriation. The 'legitimacy' of the concept of appropriation – its methodological status, if you like – is gained by its opposition to the concept of originality. Yet, to a large degree, what is held up as originality is a myth, given the degree to which art evolves as a collective enterprise, with artists always building on other artists' work. The status of appropriation as an artistic strategy is thus contingent largely on a myth of modernism. Doesn't this make it problematic, questionable as a strategy in itself?

**IT:** Perhaps that's why I like de Chirico so much, he forces you to look at his work as a totality, contrary to the tendency to look at it only up to about 1920. There's an expanding network of cross-references from image to image within his whole oeuvre. I regard my use of appropriation similarly. I'm not particularly interested in the appropriations as discrete works but rather in terms of how I can connect them up to other works I've produced. An opposition to originality isn't the main issue in my use of appropriation –

it's only a means, not an end.

**IB:** But it allows your work to talk to other artists' work, and simultaneously to talk about the other artists' work. In a more pragmatic world, isn't that what constitutes originality anyway?

**IT:** True, and I'd affirm that by adding that I feel what I do is quite original. A simple dichotomy between appropriation and originality is too simple, even though one can talk about my work in those terms. The point is the talking to and about other artists' work becomes a kind of collaboration, at the same time that there is a sense of detachment. I'm aware of these sorts of paradoxes, of the constantly shifting ground between detachment and collaboration, between originality and unoriginality. I want to retain those paradoxes.

#### Notes

- 1 Ian Burn, unpublished talk on Looking at seeing & reading, delivered at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, 29 July 1993. Burn curated Looking at seeing & reading for the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, Sydney, in 1993, and after his death in September 1993 the exhibition travelled to the Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, and the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.
- 2 Imants Tillers, The beginner's guide to oil painting, unpublished thesis, Architecture Faculty, University of Sydney, 1973.

**Ian Burn (1939-93)**, Australian artist and writer, played a significant role in Conceptual art in New York in the late 1960s, and as part of Art & Language from 1970-77. After a long involvement with union media he returned to painting in the 1980s. Ann Stephen is currently writing his biography.

Imants Tillers is an artist who lives and works in Cooma.

## JON CATTAPAN

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