



Australian Art on the Move: Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Wrapped Coast

Keith Broadfoot

To cite this article: Keith Broadfoot (2014) Australian Art on the Move: Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Wrapped Coast, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art, 14:1, 58-75, DOI: [10.1080/14434318.2014.948108](https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2014.948108)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2014.948108>



Published online: 05 Sep 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 124



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Australian Art on the Move: Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast*

Keith Broadfoot*

Department of Art History & Film Studies, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

On the initiative of John Kaldor, Christo and Jeanne-Claude visited Australia in 1969 where they realised three new artworks, the most famous of which was *Wrapped Coast*, or, to give it its full title: *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69*. The artwork was an ephemeral event, existing only for the weeks that the area of the Little Bay coastline near Sydney's Botany Bay remained covered with the polypropylene erosion-control mesh that Christo and Jeanne-Claude used for the wrapping. When the fabric was removed the artwork was no more, and though the site itself quickly returned to its former relative anonymity, the memory of the event certainly lived on. Since the time of the event, it has become standard to credit exceptional historical significance to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's visit to Australia. Edmund Capon, for example, writes:

As a firm believer in the inevitability of evolution I am not much given to the notion of 'defining moments'. If, however, there was ever such a moment in the story of modern and contemporary art in Australia it was surely the very first Kaldor project: Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast*. . .¹

As the first sentence of the foreword to a publication that accompanied an exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) celebrating 40 years of Kaldor Public Art Projects, you might expect this assessment to be overblown, subject as it is to the demands of promotion and publicity. Yet, quite to the contrary, and as I wish to argue, there is some truth to the hype.

The necessity of seeing *Wrapped Coast* as synonymous with a turning point in Australian art has equally been recognised by Daniel Thomas, who has, on a number of occasions, written about Christo and Jeanne-Claude's visit. His most interesting speculation concerning the significance of *Wrapped Coast* was made in the context of another Kaldor Public Art Project, the 1984 *An Australian Accent* exhibition held at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1) in New York, featuring the works of Mike Parr, Imants Tillers and Ken Unsworth. This exhibition constituted John Kaldor's eighth Public Art Project and was conceptually quite close to his first. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 1969 visit to Australia came about as a result of Kaldor reversing the conditions of the annual Alcorso-Sekers Travelling Scholarship Award for Sculpture, which he had helped to establish in 1966, having persuaded the textile firm that he was then working for to be the sponsor. In 1969, rather than following the founding intention of the award, which was to send an Australian artist overseas, Kaldor thought that there would be more value in bringing an overseas artist to Australia. This move, in Thomas's opinion, made Kaldor

*Email: keith.broadfoot@sydney.edu.au



Figure 1. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia* from the project *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69*, 1969, gelatin silver photograph, 120 × 161 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1971, 152.1971. Photo: AGNSW. © Christo 1969 Photo: Harry Shunk.

a ‘pioneer’, as he was ‘the first to realise that the new 1960s global village existed in terms of transport and could be operated for Australia’s benefit’.² The *An Australian Accent* exhibition neatly turned around what Kaldor had set in place with Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s 1969 visit. As Kaldor writes in the preface to the catalogue for *An Australian Accent*, where he had, over the previous 15 years, been inviting

leading artists from the United States and Europe to work in Australia and thereby to create an awareness of international contemporary art ... I undertook this exhibition to do the reverse: to bring an Australian exhibition to New York accompanied by the artists whose work will be shown.³

However, this change in the direction of the flow should not be seen as a simple reversal of the initial situation that Kaldor created in 1969. Rather, it is more the case that this taking of what was proudly declared to be ‘an Australian avant-garde’ to New York was itself only an effect of the initial staging of *Wrapped Coast*. Another way of putting this might be to suggest that it was an add-on, an accessory made possible from the surplus value that could be extracted from the initial pioneering vision of seeing how ‘transport ... could be operated for Australia’s benefit’.⁴

In this essay, I wish to explore this situation in relation to the fascinating speculative proposition that Daniel Thomas puts forward in his catalogue essay for *An Australian Accent*. At the time, Thomas was senior curator of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia and he collaborated with Kaldor on both the exhibition and the catalogue. At



Figure 2. Christo, Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia* from the project *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69*, 1969, gelatin silver photograph, 62.3 × 77.5 × 3.4 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of Chandler Coventry 1972, 13.1972. Photo: AGNSW. © Christo 1969 Photo: Harry Shunk.

the start of his essay, Thomas notes that he benefitted greatly from working on the project, gaining unexpected insight into the condition of recent Australian art. He writes that:

It has given me great pleasure not only to help John Kaldor again in another of his imaginative acts of art patronage for Australia, but also to discover that this catalogue clearly documents a well-recognised but ill-defined avant-garde aspect of the best recent Australian art.⁵

Although Thomas does not immediately elaborate on exactly what he might be referring to here, his uncertainty about how to define an Australian avant-garde art practice led him to a later observation and query. The close conceptual connection between Kaldor's first art project and the later New York project is also created by the inclusion of Imants Tillers in the exhibition. Tillers was one of the student workers who assisted in the wrapping of Little Bay, and he has often remarked on the formative influence of *Wrapped Coast* on his work. Thomas notes this, but then wonders why it was not Duchamp who provided the initiatory experience for Tillers:

One of the three in the present exhibition, Imants Tillers, counts his three weeks' work on Christo's mile-long coastal wrap-up as the beginning of his art career; he did not see the museum exhibition in Sydney the previous year of the Mary Sisler collection of Marcel Duchamp's work even though Duchamp is one of Tillers' chief sources.⁶



Figure 3. Christo, Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia* from the project *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69, 1969*, gelatin silver photograph, 62.3 × 77.5 × 3.4 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Gift of Chandler Coventry 1972, 14.1972. Photo: AGNSW. © Christo 1969 Photo: Harry Shunk.

Thomas immediately dismisses those who might counter him with the empirical fact that Tillers was only young, at just 18, by pointing out that the older Parr and Unsworth did not see the Duchamp exhibition either. Thus, there was, he thought, a shared characteristic—something beyond the individuals themselves—among these representative Australian avant-garde artists. Noting further that the ‘architecture and design crowd appreciated Duchamp—especially the theatre and film director Jim Sharman and his designer Brian Thomson who later made the cult movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [1975]’⁷, Thomas is drawn to the conclusion that it was different for artists:

It seems however that avant-garde art, even an historical avant-garde in a museum exhibition, was a scarcely known option for Australians before Christo’s *Wrapped Coast* so conspicuously raised questions about the nature of art while being so undeniably, indeed glamorously, a work of art.⁸

To push Thomas’s proposal here to the limit, it is Christo that creates an Australian avant-garde; it is only in the shadow of Christo that an Australian avant-garde exists.⁹ It is this quite startling and far-reaching idea that I wish to investigate, in order to understand why it should be that *Wrapped Coast* created this defining historical moment when, as Edmund Capon put it, ‘our perception of things’ was to irrevocably shift.¹⁰



Figure 4. Christo directs workers and volunteers to create Kaldor Public Art Project 1: *Wrapped Coast*, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69. Photo: Harry Shunk.

Art critic David Bourdon, in his authoritative 1971 text on Christo's early works, framed *Wrapped Coast* by referencing back to Christo's prior wrapped tree projects. Noting first that one of Christo's 'earliest attempted assaults upon nature' was the 1966 proposal for *Packed Trees*, an unrealised project for wrapping the trees around the Saint Louis Art Museum, Bourdon then progresses to the assault on nature that occurred on a much grander scale with *Wrapped Coast*.¹¹ Passing well beyond the scope of Christo's previous projects, Bourdon writes that:

The epic Australian venture suggests a desire to have design control not only over the urban, man-made environment, but over all of nature as well, and certainly points to a brand-new role for the artist—perhaps a self-aggrandising role as arbiter of natural resources, environment, and ecology. In activating outdoor spaces on a gigantic scale, Christo displays heroic and potentially romantic ambitions that link him to the recent development known as 'earth art'.¹²

Over the following years, Christo and Jeanne-Claude would contest and seek to correct such readings as this.¹³ It is a mistake to see their art as 'earth art' or 'land art'; also, they would argue that they are far from committing an 'assault upon nature', as they work in an environment that is already fully designed, fully controlled, and thus their work introduces the possibility of a release from those restrictions. So, for example, in an important statement by Christo, and one that he would reiterate on numerous occasions, he observes how:

Everything in the world is owned by somebody; nothing belongs to nobody. When you walk down the street somebody designed the sidewalk, the road, the highway, and even the airways. For twenty-four hours a day we are funnelled constantly in spaces that have been designed by politicians, by urban planners, by people we do not know. Basically we don't even think about it but we are existing in that kind of space. I come to that space and gently disturb it; I enjoy creating new borders, new territories, new frontiers. All my projects deal with these issues. Basically my projects are about borders and their sudden displacement.¹⁴

The implication of this is that nature as such does not exist for Christo and Jeanne-Claude. There is no going back to nature, and this is why they would argue that their art should not be classified as land or earth art. Rather than being about a direct assault on nature, for them the issue shifts to a disturbing of the very border that any conception of nature is necessarily dependent on in the first place. If there is an assault on nature, it is more to unsettle the category of nature itself.

Despite their rebuttal of Bourdon's point, it is not hard to see how he could have formed his initial opinion. One need only consider one of the most reproduced images of the *Wrapped Coast*, which depicts Christo in what Bourdon might describe as a 'self-aggrandising role', the artist's hand pointing with directorial control and seemingly able, through the way that it is positioned above the cliffs, to command a vast expanse of space. With Bourdon's evocation of an 'epic Australian venture', and his suggestion of 'romantic ambitions', it is also not hard to take the next step of imagining the whole project as a doubling of the original colonial conquest of Australia. For example, the association often elicited by the fabric is of a glistening and pure arctic terrain, which effectively stages the idea of an uninhabited and untouched territory. While it passed by without comment at the time, the doubling was made rather explicit by Jan Van der Marck in the first sentence to his catalogue essay for *Wool Works*—the exhibition Christo and Jeanne-Claude installed at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) after *Wrapped Coast*. Van der Marck wrote: 'No artist can match Christo's claim of putting the stamp of his personality on one million square feet of land. Little Bay is the first, but not likely to be the last or penultimate of Christo's land-claiming projects.'¹⁵ We can imagine this thought of a land-claim immediately arising just from the exacting, descriptive nature of the work's full title, which indeed reads like a title deed with the stating of both land area and the date of claim: *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69*.

If it is possible to see this doubling of the original colonisation of Australia in the work, it must also be considered how the work might also double for more contemporary versions of territorial conquest. Thus, the obsessive pre-planning that Christo undertakes, and his minute mapping and surveying of every square inch of the proposed site—or rather, as in the case of *Wrapped Coast*, this mapping and surveying done by others in an advanced party who relay the information back to him so that he can plan his assault from afar—appears significant: how can this not be read as a parody of the undertakings of a military invasion? Or, consider how Christo and Jeanne-Claude's visit followed in the wake of the infamous 1968 *The Field* exhibition held at the NGV. The public controversy surrounding this exhibition centred on the complaint that Australian art's integrity and substance had been easily overtaken by a far-too-willing adoption of hard-edge and colour-field painting, or by what was sometimes simply referred to as American-type painting. In this replacing of the Australian with the American model it is a not-so-insignificant fact that the idea for *Wrapped Coast*—its existence in the initial stages of what Christo and Jeanne-Claude would come to call the 'software' phase of their work, to distinguish it from the 'hardware' phase, which is the 'real' taking place of the work itself—was considered not for Australia, but for America.¹⁶ The project as it was originally packaged—and it was a package, not a



Figure 5. Christo, *Packed Coast, One Million Square Feet, Project for Australia* from the project *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia 1968–69*, 1969, scale model: fabric, rope, twine, staples, cardboard, wood, plaster, paint, pencil, perspex, 15 × 122 × 82 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales. John Kaldor Family Collection L2010.27. Photo: AGNSW. © Christo.

wrapping—was conceptually located in America, not Australia; the software was designed for America, not Australia. Furthermore, the description accompanying one of the original prototypes simply designated that it be staged somewhere in California, while another early 1968 model was titled, *Packed Coast—Somewhere on the West Coast of the USA, between Los Angeles and San Francisco*. Was it then just fortuitous, or more a mark of the times, that this non-specific place somewhere in California should be proclaimed to be a unique, unreproducible event in Australia?

Equally, we should consider the crucial formal change that Christo made from the American prototype to the Australian realisation of the work. In the early mock-ups made for a wrapping in Australia, Christo had worked with the idea of a transparent sheet, so that the transparent material and the land below would be clearly distinguishable from each other, and thus given separate identities. However, as Christo relates, when he started to receive all the aerial photographs of the Sydney site that John Kaldor sent to him in New York, and began constructing his preparatory collages, placing plastic over the cut-out images of the rock formations, he kept pencilling over the landscape, darkening and cancelling it out. The problem was, he said, that he saw too much of the landscape; the landscape was too visible. Thus, Christo moved towards the realisation that an opaque material would be best for the project, one that could hide the landscape or, in the words he uses to describe his practice of drawing over the landscape, ‘shadow it’.¹⁷

Intriguingly, Christo has understood his move towards an opaque material as related to a process of abstraction. In an interview given in 1990, when he returned to Australia for a retrospective exhibition at the AGNSW, he explained this connection via an example based on the work of Rodin. Christo pointed out that there are two versions of Rodin’s famous *Monument to Balzac*, one naked and one clothed. In the clothed Balzac, Christo says, the fabric ‘took all the detail away and unified the figure’, just as with Christo’s treatment of Little Bay, where ‘so many of the rocks and details were all unified by the fabric’. Then, in a



Figure 6. Christo, *Packed Coast, Project for Australia*, near Sydney, from the project *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69, 1969*, gelatin silver photograph, colour offset print, tape, cloth, cotton thread, staples, charcoal, pencil, Perspex box, 72 × 56.7 × 4.5 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1970 WO1.1970. Photo: AGNSW. © Christo.

fascinating associative leap, Christo speaks of his wrapping of the Pont Neuf in Paris. With the bridge in Paris, he says, ‘there were so many arches, details. When it is covered, only the proportions show. The wrapping of the bridge becomes the abstraction of the bridge. The triviality is gone, only the essence is visible’. In another leap he adds: ‘All my work deals with the very complex nature of space and is related to the definition of boundaries.’¹⁸

In the case of *Wrapped Coast*, to draw out the associations that Christo is here suggesting, the wrapping of the coast is the abstraction of it. Further, with abstraction conceived as a smoothing-out process, it is this that allows the essence of the coast (the landscape) to appear, making visible its defining condition as a boundary. From the very start of Christo's original modelling for *Wrapped Coast*—that is, with his American prototypes for the unrealised *Packed Coast*—it is evident that Christo was captivated by one of the most elemental boundaries there is: that between land and sea. Speaking of the *Packed Coast* project, Christo says: 'I picked the shoreline because the earth starts where the sea ends. The sea gives the only real geological relief of the earth.'¹⁹ In examining the various *Packed Coast* prototypes that Christo constructed, one can see his interest in visualising the effect created by extending the packaging all the way to the coastline, in particular the sculptural qualities implicit in the idea of the sea providing 'geological relief' for the earth. In translating the division between earth and sea into sculptural terms, it is as though the sea becomes the ground upon which the land as figure is to stand. As Bourdon notes, to think of the original Californian *Packed Coast* project in sculptural terms, 'it would have been a flat, ground-plane work that reached 0-degree sea level.'²⁰ As happened with minimalism, where the pedestal was eradicated and the sculpture-become-object could be placed directly on the gallery floor, in Christo's seeing of the earth itself as an art object the 'ground-plane' of the sea has taken the place of the gallery floor. The question could be asked here as to why Christo and Jeanne-Claude should be so eager to distance themselves from the label of 'earth art'; does it not seem that the label would be perfect for Christo's explanation of the motivation behind *Packed Coast*, how he selected the shoreline because he was interested in seeing where the 'earth starts'? Yet, in order to follow the artists' own request not to see their art as earth art, it is necessary to understand that it is not so much the origin of the earth that they are investigating, as its end.

Alexander Tolnay has argued, in what is now a well-established reading of the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, that the Australian *Wrapped Coast* work marked a decisive break in their career. Writing the introduction to the important publication that accompanied an exhibition on the early works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude (the period 1958–1969), Tolnay writes:

A change took place only in the final phase of the 'early works', which—as is known—was characterised by a change from the wrapping of mobile objects to the wrapping of static architecture and geographical areas. From this time onwards, the 'art objects' from the *Wrapped Coast* in Australia 1969 to the *Wrapped Reichstag* in Berlin 1995, could no longer be acquired or collected and set up in museums.²¹

The definitive break that the *Wrapped Coast* creates rests on a further crucial distinction. Tolnay writes:

The ultimate, complete break away from the museum context is also demonstrated by the fact that whilst earlier wrappings were still aimed at art institutes (1968, Kunsthalle in Bern and 1969, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago), the wrapping of the Australian coast, the conclusion of the early works, already conquered the natural landscape.²²

This idea of a final conquering of the natural landscape replays the trajectory of the escalating 'assaults on nature' that Bourdon maps out in the early works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. However, in both instances the question of what the 'natural landscape' and 'nature' might refer to needs to be qualified, or at least the ambiguity with which both authors use the expression 'nature' or the 'natural' needs to be highlighted. For

example, in Tolnay's phrase 'already conquered the natural landscape', there is an ambiguity that Tolnay was probably not aware of at the time he was writing, although it is readily recognisable today. If you shift the stress on what is conquered—is it the landscape, or the designation of the landscape as natural?—then the phrase could be read as meaning that it is the idea of a landscape being unproblematically termed natural that is overcome. That this ambiguity is not registered by Tolnay is actually crucial for his argument. If confusion was to enter here then the basis of his other clear-cut distinctions would also begin to shift and, as a result, another way of understanding the decisive event of *Wrapped Coast*, and why it was that Australia specifically should figure at that point in time, would begin to appear.

In Christo's interview on *Wrapped Coast* on the AGNSW website (as mentioned above), he makes it clear that his change of mind on the material to use for the wrapping was due to a perceived loss of sculptural impact with the transparent plastic.²³ The problem with the seeing of the landscape through the plastic was that both the landscape and the plastic remained as two clearly distinct entities. Kept separate, there was no interplay between them, no confusion of the identities between them, no ability for one to impact on the other and as a result lose itself in the other. In contrast to the transparent plastic, the opaque fabric allowed for an imprinting process to occur, in effect realising the landscape as a sculptural object. Tolnay passes over this key formal interest of Christo and Jeanne-Claude when he reductively outlines the fundamental change in their work as following a 'path from the conventional form of sculpture to the temporary [and] ephemeral work of art'.²⁴ This omission limits his analysis, for in neglecting to assess the quite pronounced interest in sculptural form that facilitated this move, Tolnay is left unaware of how such an interest alters the basis of the primary distinction that he establishes in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's career, namely that between 'the wrapping of mobile objects' and 'the wrapping of static architecture and geographical areas'.

In contrast to Tolnay, consider this observation by Dominique Laporte. By metonymy, he proposes:

Wrapped Coast signifies the whole of Australia, now a piece of merchandise in a cosmic marketplace. Similarly, the fact that whole portions of continents are affected by the image-sign of market value (the package, the bundle) destroys the idea of these lands and islands as immobile. As merchandise, an object is displaceable. Packaged, it is put into circulation. Wrapped, these lands are no longer *terres* but *territoires*, objects that we displace and exchange—in sum, the spoils of war.²⁵

Here, Laporte brilliantly overturns the common-sense expectations on which Tolnay's distinction is based, altering as a result the conventional understanding of the place of *Wrapped Coast* in the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The work is certainly still seen by Laporte as the result of conquering and assault—the 'spoils of war' (*les monnaies d'échange de la guerre*)—yet here it is the overtaking of the whole continent by commodification, or, to use the term of Baudrillard's that Laporte's wording suggests, by 'sign exchange value'.²⁶ Any publicity or commentary on *Wrapped Coast* at the time of the event always promoted the fact that, in covering one mile of coastline, it was the largest work of art ever, but Laporte makes us realise that it is much, much larger than initially thought. In effect, it is not just a delimited portion of the coast but the whole of Australia that becomes the artwork.

The fundamentally new understanding that Laporte provides can perhaps be best approached by first considering another project that Christo conceived of while in Australia. Towards the end of his stay Christo spoke of his desire to wrap a whole island, and

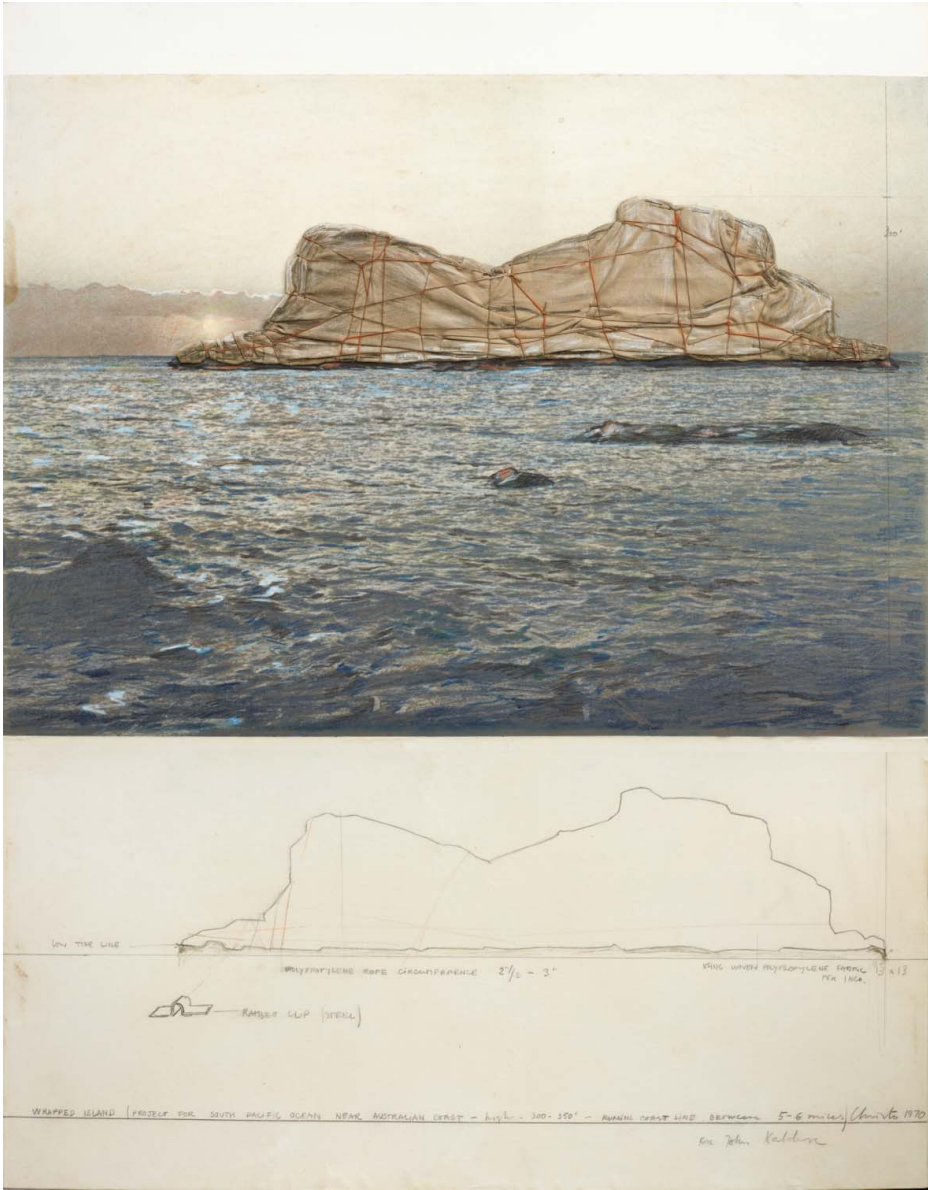


Figure 7. Christo, *Wrapped Island, Project for South Pacific Ocean*, 1970, collage: pencil, fabric, twine, staples, photograph, crayon, charcoal, pastel, Perspex box, 71.5 × 56 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales. John Kaldor Family Collection L2011.30. Photo: AGNSW. © Christo.

not long after he left Australia he produced a preparatory collage, titled *Wrapped Island, Project for South Pacific Ocean* (1970).

In the model for the project he did not specify any particular island; the text at the base of the collage simply made reference to an island ‘near the Australian coast’. Yet, in line with how Christo believes his work functions—to repeat the crucial idea from our earlier quote, ‘basically my projects are about borders and their sudden displacement’—could

we not see this island as a displacement of Australia; that is, a displacement of Australia's anxiety over its border, its obsession with defining itself by its border? If by metonymy *Wrapped Coast* exchanged part of the coast for the whole of Australia, then the covering of a whole island simply realises this equivalence. To read the island project as a refiguring of *Wrapped Coast*, in effect the seeing of Australia now as an island, then it would suggest an isolating separation as Australia's defining condition, with the complete coverage of the island accentuating how it is effectively closed off to the outside. Furthermore, the proposed island project can be understood as completing what is implicit in *Wrapped Coast* insofar as the South Pacific island, presenting the image of the exotic island paradise completely given over to providing the ultimate 'packaged' holiday escape, transforms the whole island into a commodity; that is, into an object defined by its displacement. With the island thus set adrift by its transformation into a sculptural object, the distinctions between mobile object and static geographical place become less clear. Indeed, when Christo and Jeanne-Claude did in fact complete an island project, the *Surrounded Islands* in Florida (1980–83), it was precisely this confusion between the two that was realised. As Laporte also observed with the *Surrounded Islands*, although the sensory impressions it produced were many and varied, the primary one was how the use of the fabric reduced each island

to a flat surface without depth or bottom. In our imagination, it erases the invisible anchor [*soele*—base or pedestal] that attaches this bit of land to its permanent place . . . the island is severed from its definition (an expanse of terra firma risen from the sea) . . . Its immobility becomes virtually a fiction; we see that it can sink, that it can come unstuck. And we sense that it can move about on the surface of the water, that its immobility is purely provisional, accidental.²⁷

If we now return to Daniel Thomas's hypothesis, we may be in a better position to establish its validity. His conjecture on Christo as preceding Duchamp, that the Australian avant-garde discovers Duchamp via Christo, is one that I would argue necessarily follows from Laporte's linked proposals: firstly that '*Wrapped Coast* signifies the whole of Australia and by that as well all the continent, as a piece of merchandise', and secondly that 'the fact that entire portions of continents come to be affected by the image-sign which signifies market value (the package, the bundle) destroys the idea of these lands and islands as immobile.' It is in effect the whole of Australia as a readymade object that precedes the isolated readymade object in the gallery.

Consider how this proposal explains, for example, why *Sculpturscape*, the 1973 Mildura Sculpture Triennial, should be *the* model event, as Anne Sanders has convincingly argued, for institutionalising an Australian avant-garde.²⁸ The naming of the Triennial as *Sculpturscape* itself follows from Christo, with the disappearance of landscape into sculpture and vice versa, sculpture into landscape, suggesting the landscape becomes a mobile sculptural object. This was made clear by Tom McCullough, the curator of *Sculpturscape*, when he wrote in his letter of invitation to prospective artists of his intentions for the exhibition:

The *Sculpturscape* exhibition will be a post-Christo landscape in which an Australian public gallery becomes totally concerned with the outstallation of important works of art which define, react/respond to, contradict, transform, merge with or consciously ignore a set environment.²⁹

The immediate question to ask here, though, is what would a post-Christo landscape be? And if it is post-Christo, have not the possibilities for landscape already been usurped? It is telling that McCullough even registers this when he writes that the artists

will not in fact be encountering the land or landscape, with no return to a real outside the gallery, but rather to a 'set environment'—a term that suggests both an element of staging or theatricality, and also a high degree of control—indeed, a totally managed site. It is precisely this rise of professionalism that Sanders documents with the introduction of the 'managed site' alongside the rise of the 'arts management' industry.

To return to the case of Imants Tillers, the artist whom, above all, Daniel Thomas was thinking of, it is an intriguing fact that Kaldor provided Tillers with what Wystan Curnow refers to as the two defining 'turning points' in his career.³⁰ Kaldor's first project began his career and the New York exhibition gave him his international (and also consequently national) breakthrough. As Tillers himself has commented on his inclusion in *An Australian Accent*: 'It gave me some real momentum, a foothold in New York for the next five or six years and a real international visibility.'³¹ Decisively also, although Tillers had begun his signature use of canvasboards several years before, it was only with this exhibition that, as Curnow relates, he became fully committed to the canvasboards, or, one could perhaps say, to the canvasboards in their all-encompassing totality; that is, to the 'Canvasboard System', as it came to be termed.³² It is, however, these two turning points that I am interested in seeing as one, or at least in establishing how one is inextricably bound to the other.

Recalling *Wrapped Coast*, and having observed that 'where you start is quite influential', Tillers makes the point that 'I think it was actually an important experience because it [showed] that a work of art could take a completely different form'.³³ This is a key insight into his work, as it is indeed at this level of form that a connection across the two Kaldor projects can be drawn. With Tillers's canvasboards, which can be placed on the wall, arranged to form a painting, or alternatively stacked on the floor to form a sculpture, the connecting formal element is a flattened pedestal that has become mobile. As with *Wrapped Coast* as not only a transitory event, but made of what should be stable and immobile—Australia—something destabilised and in transit, so Tillers gives to what should be a permanent and constant form—a painting—quite contrary qualities. Even more like *Wrapped Coast*, though, if Tillers's work displays not its solidity but its ability to be easily dismantled and conveniently stacked, or, better, if its underlying defining form is a *package*—the canvasboards can be parcelled and bundled ready for easy delivery—then it is as though it is the potential transporting of the work, its circulation, its overtaking by the logic of exchange value, and ultimately its exportability, that is on display. In noting this, though, the key point is that this defining formal element was only made evident for the first time in the New York exhibition. The first exhibition of what came to be included under the generic title of *Stacks*—that is, multiple stacks formed by the horizontal placement of one canvasboard upon another—took place in New York.³⁴ There were three *Stacks* works exhibited, one consisting of two stacks, one of three and one of seven. Each of the stacks was of varying heights and, as the catalogue carefully, though quite bizarrely, specifies, as if it was supplying the details to determine the cost of transportation, of varying weight.³⁵

The association goes further as well, because the transporting of the work only becomes the work, only becomes a spectacle in itself, let us say, because of the scale of the work. It is not that Tillers was initially faced just with a simple issue of logistics, posing to himself the question: if I want to make a work that is massive in scale how will it be easily transported? Or not simply this, because the fact that transportation might have been an issue indicates a need he might have felt for the works to be exhibited elsewhere; that is, how the works were dependant on their ability to reach and be accepted by an overseas audience. Thus, there is a possibility of reading, as the initial combining of Tillers's work with the rhetoric associated with the NGV's 1983 *Popism* exhibition would

suggest, a brazen and opportunistic equation behind the works: the greater the ease of transportation, the greater the potential for fame.³⁶ More than this, however, the real significance lies in how the issue of scale with Tillers's work follows from Christo and Jeanne-Claude's making of a single artwork that encompassed the whole of Australia. The immense scale of Tillers's work was emphatically equated in the *An Australian Accent* exhibition with the vast expanse of Australia's interior, highlighted in particular with the two works, *The Great Metaphysical Interior* (1983) and *Settlement at Papunya* (1983). The crucial addition made by Tillers, and this also follows from Christo and Jeanne-Claude, was that this interior could now be made transportable, and subsequently over-written by the logic of sign exchange value. The equation that Tillers in fact effects is to make the reproduced image, which, as he himself points out, is scale-less, one with the interior of Australia—the desert—which as well is outside of, or withdrawn from, scale.³⁷ One finds its vanishing point in the other, with the discovery to be made—and this is the trope of the lost or failed explorer that Tillers also uses in his work—that any interior essence of Australia is defined by its reproduction. All this, however, must once again be quite specifically related to Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

The *Wrapped Coast* was unquestionably an event that was, as Walter Benjamin would say, designed in advance for reproduction; it was made for the camera, and for the photograph to be taken. Yet the fact that its reproduction defines it, that all the scale-less images of the event can proliferate, is only because the work simultaneously defies reproduction, in fact even defies sight, in that it is also outside of scale. While so far I have been focusing on Laporte's observation that it was not just the coast but the whole of Australia that was wrapped by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, I have only been presenting part of the picture. To now give the full effect, to be swept away by Laporte's words, following them as one might the spectacular zoom-out effect in the latest Hollywood blockbuster, he writes (and the given, more poetic translation of his text misses this, so I offer a more literal, albeit more awkward, version of the text): '*Wrapped Coast* signifies (or designs) the whole of Australia, and by this the whole continent, as a commodity of a market whose scale is no longer that of the world, but the entire universe.' (*Par métonymie, Wrapped Coast désigne l'Australie tout entier, et par là tout continent, comme marchandise d'un marché dont l'échelle n'est plus même le monde, mais l'univers tout entier.*)³⁸ In fact, in following to the end Laporte's words you realise that the zoom-out effect, however digitally enhanced it might be, actually stops short of picturing what is at stake here. In transitioning from the planet to the universe in its totality, the work itself becomes scale-less, impossible to place *in* scale. If all was not revealed before, the extent to which Laporte makes us realise that *Wrapped Coast* was much, much larger than was first believed must also be further expanded: the work is no longer limited to Australia, but becomes equivalent to the totality of the universe. As a kind of iconoclastic challenge, and to play on the work's appearance as the set of a science fiction film, it is as if *Wrapped Coast* creates another (parallel) universe, the ultimate uncanny double.³⁹ However, the truly confounding thing with all this, which is at once miraculous and diabolical, is that an outside to the totality of the entire universe is impossible to conceive; that is, the work's point of creation, the ultimate point of view that defines *Wrapped Coast*, is one that is impossible to occupy.

It is this troubling thought that equally arises if we pursue the implications of replacing Laporte's reference to the 'image which signifies market value (the package, the bundle)' with Baudrillard's sign exchange value. Baudrillard's theoretical manoeuvre in bringing together semiotics and political economy, the conceptual move in the shift from exchange value to sign exchange value, results in the economy being conceived as an autonomous totality; indeed, the scale of the economy is escalated to the totality of the

universe. Baudrillard writes, for example: ‘We enter a social environment of synthesis in which a total abstract communication and an immanent manipulation no longer leave any point exterior to the system.’⁴⁰ From exchange value to sign exchange value, a commodity no longer has any interior essence, any defining characteristics of its own, a commodity only *is* in relation to *all* the other commodities that constitute the totality of the system, just as structural linguistics designates the meaning of a word, or, more fundamentally, a signifier, only in relation to all other signifiers. The mystery to this, however, is that this ‘all’, the totality, escapes representation. Baudrillard maintains his debt to structuralism in that, just as structuralism argues, it is impossible to explain language diachronically, for it has always already arrived, just suddenly ‘all here’ as Lévi-Strauss would say, the same with the economy ruled by sign exchange value.⁴¹ The fact that we cannot see this moment of economic totality is one of the key reasons behind Christo’s initial strategy of wrapping objects, since the covering over is the figuring—the doubling—of the blindness of this instant. On this point it is again important to pay careful attention to Laporte’s wording, because he too stresses that with the continent affected by sign exchange value it is all of a sudden—‘*tout d’un coup*’—that the perception of the land’s immobility is altered. This is a point given further significance by the fact that he writes that the sign exchange value suddenly ‘*détourne imaginairement*’ these lands; although this is translated as ‘destroys’, he is also making an important allusion to the situationist practice of *détournement*, a key early influence on Christo. Without here entering into a detailed debate surrounding the meaning of the term, *détournement* broadly refers to a practice whereby a pre-existing media image is in some way strategically altered to produce a meaning other than, and usually diametrically opposed to, the original intended meaning of the image. The basis of the practice has a lineage back to Dadaist and cubist collage, though now, although no English translation is usually given for the term, it has become subsumed by the more all-encompassing term ‘appropriation’. If *détournement* could be said to be concerned with turning the signified of an image against itself, then Christo’s reconfiguring of the object by covering it over would suggest a more radical withdrawal or eclipse of meaning that operates more on the level of the signifier; that is, the medium or system itself, rather than a specific signified. If, further, this could be conceived as registering the overtaking of *détournement* by appropriation, then this would be yet another marker of the significance of *Wrapped Coast* and the particular use of Australian content that was made at this point.⁴²

When Tillers shifts the exhibiting of the vertically placed canvasboards from the wall to their horizontal stacking on the floor (or, to put this another way, when he precedes the conventional vertical exhibition with a ‘pre-exhibition’ horizontal stacking) and we are faced with seeing the canvasboards side-on, there is of course no image to be seen—there is no ‘looking into’ any image. That there is this ‘nothing to see’ can be understood as a figuration of how it is just displacement itself that is to be seen, or, more precisely, since this transportation or circulation cannot itself be seen, how it is the staging of the impossibility of seeing this. Further, this shift between the vertical and the horizontal, insofar as it makes evident that there is no interior to the image, that there is nothing to be seen inside the image, strangely makes Tillers’s canvas resemble Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s fabric. This is so in a number of different ways, but in each case the similarity results from how, with *Wrapped Coast*, if the part is rendered equivalent to the whole, it means that the periphery is now the whole of Australia, that the border *is* Australia. One implication of this is that any interior has been ‘sold off’, has simply become part of a surface package. It is then not, to further consider Christo’s proposal on the association between the use of fabric and a process of abstraction, that any interior essence was revealed, but that the

interior became equivalent to an exterior sign, presenting itself now as compressed on the surface, as indeed happens to the images in Tillers's canvasboards. As the precursor to appropriation art in Australia, there is no question that *Wrapped Coast* places not simply Australia, but the sign of Australia, into circulation in a new way, and precisely insofar as any interior essence now becomes transportable, defined by its sign exchange value.

Christopher D. Morris has suggested that Christo is the 'first global artist'.⁴³ This can be understood in the sense not only that Christo has been, after his fleeing from Bulgaria, homeless, but that this characterises his art as well, not only because his art has taken place in many different countries, but also that it cannot remain in any one place, that there is no final resting place for any of the works. In this, Christo's art is a symptom of the rise of globalisation, or of the new world system, as Fredric Jameson describes it. Indeed, the final point to be drawn from Laporte's reading of *Wrapped Coast* is that while it can be claimed that the work was the first truly global art event, it was also an event that suddenly shifted our 'perception of things', that it happened in a blinding instant, you could even say, which makes it equally one of the first truly compelling instances of what would come to be termed the 'contemporary'. It could be suggested, then, that although Edmund Capon hedges his bets and positions *Wrapped Coast* as the defining event of either 'modern or contemporary' art in Australia, while Daniel Thomas refers to a redundant 'avant-garde' that has already passed into history, it is in fact the arrival of contemporary art in Australia that the coming of Christo announces.⁴⁴ Further still, although Ian McLean recently claimed that it was Australian Aborigines who invented the idea of contemporary art, the story he relates is only a partial one if *Wrapped Coast* is not included.⁴⁵ Reading McLean as a kind of counterargument to Capon, an alternative proposition on the defining moment in the history of contemporary art in Australia would be the composite board that is placed on the ground at Papunya in 1971. Yet, to what extent is this truly an opposing proposal? Is this not a moment that is prefigured by the fastening down of fabric for *Wrapped Coast*? This is all, of course, yet to be proven, but if it were to be, then there would be a need, I would suggest, for an addition to Richard Bell's infamous *Bell's Theorem* series, which began as a parody of Tillers. Yes, there is no question that 'Aboriginal Art—It's a White Thing', and also 'Australian Art—It's an Aboriginal Thing', but both of these are only subsets of an all-encompassing third statement: 'Aboriginal Art—It's A Global Thing'.

Notes

1. Edmund Capon, 'Foreword', in *40 Years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, ed. Sophie Forbat (Botany: Kaldor Public Art Projects, 2009), 18.
2. Daniel Thomas, 'The Artists and their Australian Context', in *An Australian Accent: Three Artists: Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, Ken Unsworth*, ed. Daniel Thomas (Sydney: John Kaldor Art Projects, 1984), 13.
3. John Kaldor, 'Preface', in *An Australian Accent*, 8.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 13.
7. *Ibid.*, 13.
8. *Ibid.*
9. In 1994, Christo and Jeanne-Claude decided that joint authorship should be attributed to many of the works that were previously credited only to Christo. In this article, I do on occasions speak of Christo, rather than Christo and Jeanne-Claude, in order to maintain the historical significance that was attached to Christo as the sole creator.
10. Capon, 'Foreword', 18.

11. David Bourdon, *Christo* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), 45.
12. Ibid.
13. Included on the official Christo and Jeanne-Claude website is a text by Jeanne-Claude written to correct some of the 'most common errors' made about their work. One of the errors she responds to is the labelling of their art as 'land art'. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/common-errors>.
14. Christo, interview by Eric Shanes, 'New Borders, Territories, Frontiers: Christo and the Boundaries of Sculpture', *Apollo*, Vol. 130, no. 330 (August, 1989): 110.
15. Jan Van der Marck, *Christo: Wool Works* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1969), 2.
16. See the Timeline section of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's website, which explains their use of these terms and also maps the software and hardware phase of each of their major projects. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/timeline>.
17. See the interview with Christo on *Wrapped Coast* on the AGNSW's Gallery Channel: <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/channel/clip/272/>.
18. Valerie Lawson, 'Wrapping with Christo', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 September 1990, 17.
19. As quoted in Bourdon, *Christo*, 46.
20. Ibid.
21. Alexander Tolnay, 'Introduction', in Alexander Tolnay, Lawrence Alloway, David Bourdon and Wolfgang Volz (eds), *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958–1969* (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2002), 8.
22. Ibid.
23. Christo, interview on *Wrapped Coast*. AGNSW, <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/channel/clip/272/>.
24. Tolnay, 'Introduction', 9.
25. Dominique Laporte, *Christo*, trans. Abby Pollak (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 36–37.
26. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 143.
27. Laporte, *Christo*, 57.
28. Anne Sanders, 'The Mildura Model', *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art*, Vol. 12 (December 2012): 127–139. n.b. "Sculpturscape" was written with just one 'e' in early catalogues.
29. Tom McCullough's letter to artists as quoted in Graeme Sturgeon, *Sculpture at Mildura: The Story of the Mildura Sculpture Triennial, 1961–1982* (Mildura: Mildura City Council, 1985), 50.
30. Wystan Curnow, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), 10.
31. As quoted in Sophie Forbat, '1984/An Australian Accent: Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, Ken Unsworth', in *40 Years*, 150.
32. Curnow, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*, 24. As Tillers also comments on this moment: 'Once John said he was interested to put me in that show, I worked in earnest for the next six months and pushed the canvasboard works much further.' As quoted in Forbat, *40 Years*, 146.
33. Abigail Fitzgibbons, 'Imants Tillers and Conceptual Art', in *Brought to Light II. Contemporary Australian Art 1966–2006*, eds. Lynne Seear and Julie Ewington (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery Publishing, 2007), 86.
34. Many of my ideas on Tillers and transportation, including a connection to be made between Tillers's *Stacks* and the work of Fred Williams, are discussed in Rex Butler's 'Imants Tillers – The Last Australian or the First Post-Australian Artist?' (paper delivered as the 2009 Salek Minc Lecture, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia). University of Queensland, <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:177452>. There is also more to the relationship between Tillers's *Stacks* and Christo than I mention here, because at the same time as Christo began covering objects, he also began *stacking* oil barrels.
35. Kaldor, *An Australian Accent*, 15.
36. The *Popism* exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1983 and curated by Paul Taylor. Intriguingly, the writing about this period-defining show came to be associated with the exporting of Tillers's work, in particular the link to be made between Paul Taylor's influential article, 'Popism: The Art of the White Aborigines' in *On the Beach*, 1 (1982) and Tillers's first solo overseas exhibition, *White Aborigines*, held at Matt's Gallery in London in 1983.

37. Imants Tillers, 'In Perpetual Mourning', in *Imants Tillers Venice: Biennale 1986 Australia* ed. Kerry Crowley (Sydney: Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts; Adelaide: Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1986), 16.
38. Dominique Laporte, *Christo* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 34.
39. On the connection between *Wrapped Coast* and the uncanny see the chapter 'Doubles, Doppelgängers, and the Third Hand', in Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), 179–188.
40. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 202.
41. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 59.
42. The wider study of Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Australia of which this article is a part explores in more detail the ideas suggested in this paragraph, particularly in relation to the influence of the writings of Paul Foss on the conceiving of appropriation art in Australia. Christo's use of 'simulation models' draws added significance from Foss's innovative use of Baudrillard, as equally does Christo's collapsing of the border between earth and ocean from Foss's use of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'smooth space'.
43. Christopher D. Morris, *The Figure of the Road: Deconstructive Studies in Humanities Disciplines* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 183.
44. One final observation by Daniel Thomas should be mentioned here, as it is one where he does shift from speaking of the avant-garde to the contemporary. The various John Kaldor Public Art Projects would, Thomas suggests, 'qualify him [Kaldor] as Australia's leading curator of contemporary art, even though he has never been employed by a museum' (Daniel Thomas, *An Australian Accent*, 13). On the significance of the term 'contemporary', including some commentary on Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast*, see Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King, 2011), 32.
45. Ian McLean, ed., *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: An Anthology of Writing on Aboriginal Art 1980–2006* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2011).