

# Peeling the onion in post object art

DONALD BROOK

**AN UNFOLDING WORK** by Imants Tillers at Watters gallery, Sydney, and the Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne. **NEW GUINEA STUDENTS** at the Wentworth building, University of Sydney. **CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE PAINTING** at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

ALTHOUGH I doubt that I fully understand it yet, the judgment has clearly formed in my mind that Imants Tillers has made a truly excellent and important work of art that will one day be indispensable to history books and give pleasure to generations. Children, being taught to understand the 20th century, will be brought to see it, and whatever museum is prescient enough to acquire it will have to print and reprint elucidations and generate fresh facsimiles to replace components lost or stolen or traded or worn out with handling.

It will no doubt undergo periods of eclipse, its 777 parts locked up in their cabinet, perhaps for years, until somebody with patience and imagination takes it apart again and makes it work.

Somewhere there must be a beginning to begin at, and the artist may as well provide it. If you have not been following the post object action in Sydney closely you will probably not have heard his name. As a student of architecture he became interested in structural relations and in

systems of all kinds, including economic, social and political systems. He wrote a thesis on the theme, under the encouraging study program of the Sydney university faculty of architecture, where students and staff appear to be on the same side. He read a great deal about the analysis of processes, about struc-

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turalism, semiology and linguistics.

How much of all this he understood, in the most liberal academic sense, is not clear, for his way of responding to the input has not been to feed back the theory in didactic forms that an examiner might comfortably grade, but rather to exemplify the style of thought and attitudes he has absorbed in concrete models and examples of an imaginative kind.

The present work, now constituting part of an exhibition at the Victorian Arts Centre, is a densely integrated model of art itself, of the characteristic processes of art and of the institutional context of art. It is a gallery within a gallery; an object and a diagram. Even the article I am now writing is incorporated in the work in principle, although I have cheated the artist by knowing and revealing more about the total work than I am supposed to know and tell. And that remark will require explanation.

It goes like this. The work in its present state, in Melbourne this week, is a sort of onion layer built around an earlier one shown in Sydney. The inner core is supplemented in a number of ways, including the addition to it of critical reviews of that kernel. The entire process is to be seen as modelling some of the principal institutions of art, just as the objects of the Sydney exhibition model larger works (they are all one seventh scale models) and also model the characteristic generative or structural processes of art such as the trans-

formation of designs by change of scale, orientation, magnification and representational projection.

The first exhibition, held for the very purpose of being encapsulated in the second, took place at Watters gallery (one of only a tiny handful of places where anything of importance has happened in

Australian art in the past ten years). Its duration was one hour precisely, and those invited critics who thought they could afford to miss it can eat their hearts out.

We were supposed, acting qua critics and with a proper docility to the system, to review that very peculiar miniature exhibition, without any projective grasp of the artist's purpose, which was to bottle the whole thing for further processing. I am cheerfully cheating because I don't care to be used by the system if I can help it — not even by an artist I greatly admire. And something can be said about the Sydney show, without compromise, although it will inevitably sound tedious if it is long enough to be clear, and incomprehensible if it is short enough to remain lively.

In brief: there were four sequences each of seven miniature works, manifesting related transformations. One of them was a matrix of tiles (49 to a set) showing a regular shift in arrangement so as to stress the image at one end and the matrix or frame at



RENNIE ELLIS/SCOPIX

the other.

The second was a sequence of partly scaled paintings showing successive magnification and change of orientation so that, in one sense, detail is progressively selected and emphasised, in another sense it reciprocally disappears.

The third was a set of solid transformations of a cube, so constructed that from the right point of view each one gives a correct visual projection as of a cube rendered conventionally in a painting or drawing. And there is a game with pattern as well, related to the tiles and the paintings, that needs to be seen.

The fourth set of objects were penetrated, nesting, cubes with photographic images on a face, the image in each case being derived from the last of the set. And all this rigmarole, easy to see and woefully difficult to describe, was prettily set out like an exhibition of paintings and sculptures.

It will all be fitted in to a most ingeniously constructed cabinet of drawers (fabricated by Cecil Pitman) along with various documents and instructions for unwrapping, redistribution and use in Melbourne.

Although there is a lot more to be said there may be no point, for present pur-

poses, in saying it. To fully comprehend this work would take hours (it has taken the artist weeks and months to generate it, in prepared soil) and descriptive, analytic language gives no sense of the delight accompanying successive revelations of meaning in the work. It can be used like an elaborate game, read like a book, viewed like a sculpture, unscrambled like a code, experienced like life. Above all it can be enjoyed and admired for its immense allusiveness and complexity. It is one of the most intelligent and resolute works of imagination that I have seen in years, in Australia or anywhere else, and if art reviewing were only like this every fortnight, who would ever choose to do anything else?

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THERE are at least two other interesting exhibitions on at the moment, that should be seen and discussed: the "Wok Belong Niugini Tude" at the new Wentworth building, Sydney university, and "The Art of Surface" (contemporary Japanese painting) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Neither promises an epiphany, but then, that's art.