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WRITING THE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN ART:
ITS PAST, PRESENT AND POSSIBLE FUTURE

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In the past few years a number of initiatives have begun to change the ways the history of Australian art is being written. The expansion of general art history courses at universities in the 1960s and at colleges in the 1970s, as well as the increased interest in art in schools and amongst the general public, has raised a demand for more information about art, particularly Australian art. This is being supplied by monographs on usually well-known artists, picture-book compilations around a favourite period or a rather obvious theme (landscape, the desert, Sydney Harbour), and by reprints of earlier histories. The more scholarly and more speculative work being done by certain writers and a number of researchers is not as readily supported by publishers. Much of it remains locked up in theses, or is scattered through journals whose main emphasis is quite other literary, historical or political. Sometimes it is gathered in small edition anthologies. Yet it is in such work that the history of Australian art is being reconceived.¹

Why is this reconception necessary? What forms is it taking? These questions form the subject of this article. They will be approached historiographically, as questions about method. Such an approach recognises that the various histories of Australian art which serve as textbooks, as collections of pleasure-giving pictures or as coffee-table adornment, are one of the key determinants of our understanding of Australian art's history, and that they work selectively. The starting-point of an alert, critical relationship to our art must, therefore, be an exploration of the assumptions underlying these texts, asking how they construct their histories. A number of such books has been written, particularly since the mid-1930s. They are all products of certain needs for definition very much of their period. Cumulatively, however, they have come to constitute an orthodoxy - complex, many-sided and divided as to cultural level, but nonetheless an orthodoxy which has recently seemed to be more closed than open to different perspectives, new possibilities. In this they reflect a still dominant social view which restricts the scope of art primarily to a professional practice serving a limited audience. While acknowledging the distinctive qualities of such a practice, I believe that a broader view has become necessary.

The last attempt to survey the history of Australian art - Robert Hughes's *The Art of Australia* - was begun in 1962, although it did not appear until 1970.² Daniel Thomas's *Outlines of Australian Art* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1973) is less a history than a set of sketches built around the outstanding collection of Melbourne art dealer Joseph Brown.³

Three of the four serious histories have been recently reprinted: William Moore's *The Story of Australian Art* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934) in 1980; Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945) in 1979; and his *Australian Painting, 1788 to 1960* (Melbourne: O.U.P., 1962), often reprinted since its second edition update in 1971. Herbert P. Badham's *A Study of Australian Art* (Sydney: Currawong, 1949) remains confined to its first edition. Recent surveys have focused on specific artistic practices, such as sculpture, on special emphases, such as the contributions of women artists, or have absorbed the visual arts within broader cultural perspectives, such as popular culture or images of Australia.⁴ As well, a number of period studies have appeared, all with implications for the history of Australian art well beyond the years they nominally treat.⁵ In such books, and in the research referred to above, one senses a different history of Australian art struggling to find a voice - or, as I will argue, different histories spoken by different voices.

Does the absence of a new general history since 1965 indicate a failure of nerve on the part of those historians, critics and artists capable of undertaking such a task? Or does it bespeak a reserve, quite properly issuing from a mistrust of broad-scale historical generalisation, a hesitation in the face of key difficulties in art theory, a loss of direction amidst the major shifts which have occurred in the recent epistemology, and, perhaps, a heightened sensitivity to the political implications of our cultural assumptions and intellectual practices? All these mitigate against bold assertions about the nature of artistic change across two centuries, even against the assumption that there exists a consensus about the object of our work (that is, "Australian art"). But such concerns also provide the opportunity for developing approaches to writing history which could be more richly resonant, more deeply embedded, more significant for related social practices than the orthodoxies.

An important component of these new perspectives is a critical awareness of history writing as itself an institutional practice, with major conventions and constraints, personal investments and power struggles, competing ideologies and practical contradictions. All of these condition the ways history is written, despite claims about "objectivity", "history as it happened", the "irreducibility of the artwork itself" and even, although differently, about "history from below". Art history is very much a product of the social relations in which it is formed - and within which it struggles for autonomy, or, at least, distinctiveness.

Yet art history relates to other academic pursuits as a site for the production of certain (marginal) knowledges, to the art market as both a servicing factory and a legitimising (dis)interest, and to art-making as publicity, historical gatekeeper or, sometimes, as substitute. Art history is also, in an important sense, the subject of museum curatorship, providing much of its organisational content. As well, it authenticates patronage of the arts by individuals and the state. Mostly it prepares people for membership of various audiences: students, gallery-goers, collectors, the up-to-date (trendy), the cultured. Finally, and significantly, it processes the material for the popular mythology of art and artists: the promise of refinement/luxury/reward, the artist as rebellious hero, artworks as expressions of national character. These are disseminated in a relatively restrained way through the education

system, and in more blatant relations to pleasure and profit in the commercial media,

One way of developing a critical sense of the institutional nature of art history is, of course, to recognise that the practice has itself a history - indeed, different histories in different societies and in the unequal relations between these societies. The account of "normal" art history by Mark Roskill, for example, is revealed as a quite specifically post-World War II United States sort of approach when set against Erwin Panofsky's 1953 essay on the subject and Lido Kultermann's German-centred history.⁶ No history of art history in Australia is known to me, although review essays by Franz Philipp (1959), June Stewart (1974), Bernard Smith (1975 and 1982), and Ursula Hoff in this volume provide important information and inevitably, but not overtly, opinion.⁷ They make it clear that European, not Australian, art has been the main interest of historians working here, and that only quite recently have undergraduates had the opportunity to take courses in Australian art. Most courses centre on Europe, including England and sometimes the United States, with very few looking at Asian art and none at Aboriginal art. While most graduate and honours students work perforce in Australian art, the external focus of the discipline has mitigated against the continuance of this interest - until recently. It is becoming increasingly apparent that Australian visual cultures not only constitute "fields" in which interesting work might be done, but also that they are demanding of us that such work be done. One condition of adequacy here is the need to see critically how we are being situated by our predecessors,

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Note: The following remarks were first presented as part of an Introductory lecture to students taking a course in Australian visual cultures in 1980. I had begun teaching this course with David Saunders in 1978, continued with Ian Burn and Virginia Spate between 1979 and 1981, and now work with Joan Kerr and other staff and graduate students of the Department of Fine Arts, Sydney University. Their work forms the basis of the Department's commitment to Australian art studies. I have learnt much from them, and am grateful. The views urged here, however, are my own. Some, mostly minor, revisions have been made of the lecture as given. Because I deal with changes in writing the history of Australian art, mainly in terms of changes in local cultural and historical perception, I have added a third part to this article on the influences of European and English art history and have attempted to bring the account up to date.

It seems possible to distinguish six phases in the history of the writing of histories of Australian art - or, better, six moments when (usually for reasons both internal and external to developments within artmaking, art history, criticism and related Institutional practices) it became clear that the history of Australian art could be, indeed needed to be, seen differently. The revisions constructed at each moment then influenced subsequent history writing to a greater or lesser degree, and for longer or shorter periods. Each revision raised new questions, and answered the old ones differently or ignored them. New research requirements became obvious at each phase, usually broadening the field - but not necessarily, nor in an evenly progressive way, as if we were steadily moving towards the ultimate

"complete account". Each revision influenced the way museum collections were formed and displayed, exhibitions mounted, criticism written, tastes and judgements formulated, teaching and learning done, collections assembled, artworks bought and sold, and the way art in Australia was made. Indeed, changes in these practices constitute the revision in each case. One or two key texts (books, exhibitions) expressed each revision more clearly or influentially than those which they inspired; they may be taken as typical of the approach but not as exhaustive of it. Nor is the process as neat as it may appear from these notes: each revision competes to define the overall situation, but usually gains only partial allegiance from those involved in the relevant practices. Each break is made by building on questions which seem, to some, to be inadequately answered, or on new material which seems inadequately assimilable, by the old model. Thus the new proceeds from a criticism of the old but is, at the same time, determined by it.

All these are features typical of changes in intellectual history; what follows is a first attempt to sort out their shape with regard to Australian art historiography. It needs much more detailed development. Nonetheless, it may serve to raise questions about the methodology of the texts mentioned.

1. The Colonial Period: 1788-1880s.

This is not, strictly speaking, a period within the history of Australian art history for the very good reason that, at the time, artistic production here was not seen as sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate *history* of its own. Nor, to my knowledge, did histories of English art devote a section to the art of the Australian colonies, that is, view art here as a subsection of English art. Nonetheless, this would have been a conventional view --- it is, in fact, given form in the various international exhibitions held in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. There do not seem to be any documents which even approximate a history before 1899. Rather, the notices, reports, reviews and reminiscences which were published mostly in magazines here and in England indicate, as Bernard Smith puts it, that the major visual arts interests of colonial culture were:

. . . the formation of aesthetic views about nature in Australia, the creation of the first art collections, the interaction of English taste and the colonial social and geographic environment, the moral preoccupations and aspirations of Victorian Evangelists and Utilitarians, the growing concern about art education. . .⁸

He adds "the triumph of nationalism in art and taste", discussion of which I reserve for the moment.

There was, of course, concern about the progress and development of these views and institutions, but they do not seem to have been seen as sufficiently advanced to require historical review. It is, however, odd that no exceptions to this tendency have been found. Rather, the energy went into advancing these interests further, or differently.

2. Bourgeois Nationalism: 1880s to 1930s.

Nationalism made Australian art perceptible: a society conceiving itself (at least somewhat) as a coherent entity could

see that its people, institutions, culture and its art were in some ways distinctive. Around 1888 "Australian life" as a subject for art becomes almost an instant cliché in art criticism: Sidney Dickinson puts it forward with confidence, Julian Ashton is more reserved.⁹ Curiosity about how this distinctiveness came about inspired the first historical sketch, that of James Green ("de Libra") in 1899, and the first researches, such as those of William Dixon and William Moore.¹⁰

An important indicator was the exhibition of Australian art at the Grafton Gallery, London, in 1898. One reviewer, R. A. M. Stevenson, typically saw the distinctiveness of the work in terms of a shift from dependence on English to French models, another dismissed it all as bad art.¹¹ This sort of exhibition aimed at measuring the achievements of Australian artists such as Roberts and Ashton against established English art. But the nationalism was not emphatic, rejective, republican. It was rather an effort to match English academic art by the use of "French" methods, something many English artists were doing, for example, the Newlyn School painters and the members of the New English Art Club. The difference is that Australian subjects were preferred, and that they were, in crucial cases, *historical* subjects with contemporary relevance.¹²

Just as important was the effort, from the mid 1880s onwards, to win an audience, a market for Australian art here. The first consciously nationalist historical sketches were both written by artists. Sydney Long (1905) and Frederick McCubbin (1916) both emphasise the distinctive achievement of the Heidelberg School generation as the key to the possibility of a national art. They give prominence to artists born in Australia. McCubbin refers only in passing to Tom Roberts and cites Louis Buvelot, Walter Withers, David Davies and Arthur Streeton as the key figures of our "National Tradition of Art". The history of Australian art becomes the preconditions and the precursors of the Heidelberg School.¹³

McCubbin's nationalism was a World War I patriotism.¹⁴ But it is really in the postwar "country still to make" 1920s that the visual arts "legend of the 'Nineties'" is elaborated, with the Heidelberg School as its centerpiece.¹⁵ It comes first from the artists themselves, mostly expatriates returning from a disappointing English experience, and is developed into a triumphant, then (in the later 1930s and 1940s) an embattled, orthodoxy by such influential writers/gallery directors as Lionel Lindsay and J. S. McDonald. Heidelberg School continuities are seen in the work of Hans Heysen and Elioth Gruner, new phases in essentially similar picturings of the national landscape.¹⁶ The specific nationalisms being evoked here need careful assessment, as does their relationship to other merging tendencies, such as regionalism, realism and modernism.

William Moore's *The Story of Australian Art* (1934) is the outstanding historical work of this phase. He raises the landmarks approach of the artists and writers just mentioned to the level of a structure which organises his large amount of reference material in a particular way. He proudly shows a steady, evolutionary development of gradually greater achievement within inherited frameworks of artistic production: the nineteenth-century academic painting subject areas, i.e., landscape, history and genre. The period before 1880 is covered in one-fifth of the two volumes,

the turning point is the "camps around Melbourne" which lead to "The Australian School of landscape Painters". History and genre are treated as images of "National Life",

Other important moments were "Sydney in the Eighties and Nineties" (although of minor significance compared to Melbourne), the expatriates ("Artists Abroad") and "War". And all of these themes are thoroughly embedded in his other great priority, the growth and the substantiality of the art institutions, Thus there are long chapters on societies, galleries, schools, the art market, usually stressing the role of artists within them. The story of the institutionalisation of art, the anecdotes of all those involved in the endeavour, the society of these artists this is what inspires him. The maturity of art within these terms secures its normality; that it occurs here, and has the local landscape and life as its subjects, secures its Australianness. The remarks of artists are Moore's constant references. His movement back and forward between journalism and history makes his Story also a document revelatory of the pattern of values in the Sydney artworld of the 1930s.¹⁷

3. *Realism versus Aestheticism.*

The key text here is Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945). It was written during the war by a member of the Communist Party thoroughly committed to the defence of Western civilisation against the fascist barbarism sweeping Europe and threatening the world. Thus the history of Australian art is seen as part of a wider cultural/social struggle - specifically, the dialectical struggle between aestheticism and realism. This is a projection back from the crucial debates of the time: between modernism and social realism in art, between fascism and communism in Ideology and politics.¹⁸ Generally, Smith's approach parallels that of Brian Fitzpatrick's histories of Australia and Gordon V. Childe's political analyses.¹⁹

Smith offers a relatively straightforward account of the colonial period, then follows his predecessors in emphasising the Heidelberg School period as the decisive phase. He sees Roberts et al. as part of a practical realist tradition, particularly with regard to the content of their work and in their artisanship, but also as open to late nineteenth-century aestheticism, particularly in their "Impressionist" techniques. In the early twentieth century Smith sees realism decline into a narrow, chauvinistic nationalism (the later Streeton/J. S. McDonald), edging into fascism. He sees, simultaneously, aestheticism growing in Australian poetry and in modernist painting, also moving dangerously close to fascism.²⁰ Only the continuing realism of William Dobell and the new socialist realism of Russell Drysdale, Noel Counihan, Jost Bergner, etc., offer a defence against fascism and a solid basis for artists to meet the demands being made of them. He ends the book confident of the future of realism as the main direction of Australian art,

4, *Europe vis-a-vis Australia; Modernism.*

There is, fascinatingly, another voice speaking through the commitment to realism in *Place, Taste and Tradition*. For all of his attacks on the drift of such modernist tendencies as aestheticism and surrealism towards fascism, Smith recognises the absolute necessity of placing the history of Australian art in the context of changes in European art, and concedes that the key to the history of recent European art is the stylistic progression of Modern Art. He thus organises Australian art since the 1880s into the given phases: Impressionism, Aestheticism, Post-Impressionism, "Modernism, second phase" ("modified forms of Cubism and Constructivism"), Surrealism and Realism. The history-making exhibitions program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, clearly influenced him as much as it did his English critical mentor, Herbert Read. The National Landscape School ("Academic Impressionism") was not only politically anathema to realist tendencies, it was also blocking the emergence of modernist ones. And Realism, while it was pitted against fascism in modernism, was not against Modern Art as such - indeed, it was part of it, a particularly local inflection of it. Many of the "bridging passages" in the book are, exercised by the complexities of these relationships.²¹

But if Smith agonised somewhat over this, others, unencumbered by realist commitments, took the view that the modernisation of Australian art and culture was inevitable, if embarrassingly slow in coming. Already in 1930, W. K. Hancock's delight that "the painters have revealed Australia to the Australians" is tempered: "their nationalist outlook on art is healthy, so long as it does not perpetuate itself."²² By 1949 Hartley Grattan protested the "ridiculous stone-walling in which the conservatives of today are engaged."²³ The frustration is that the patterns of European cultural development are not being followed - in the case of art, this "naturally" means French painting.

Emphasis on European cultural influence is foregrounded during the 1950s and 1960s for a number of interrelated reasons. Realism did not grow and lead Australian art, nor that of any Western country. The shift in dependence from Britain to the United States became obvious during this period; Cold War ideologies such as McCarthyism exerted their influence; the figure of Menzies seemed to dominate political life. All this led to a long period of uncertainty about the nature of Australian culture, captured in A. A. Phillips's concept of the "cultural cringe".²⁴ These doubts affected the key history, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788-1960* (Melbourne: O.U.P., 1962).²⁵

The Introduction states the two main themes: "Australian art is a European art flourishing in the South-East Asian world" and "Australian art has gradually acquired qualities as distinctive as the social attitudes and speech of Australians". But it is how these two themes are related that is crucial: "For the Australian artists there are two traditions of special importance, the European tradition itself and the local Australian tradition which is itself a variant of the European tradition". Note, first, the importance of the idea of "tradition" here: we need to ask what it might mean. Clearly, it is artistic, specifically painting, traditions that Smith has in mind, not the intellectual, ideological, institutional traditions of *Place, Taste and Tradition*. How do these traditions function: as monolithically determining, selectively, or as continually shifting, transient sets of tendencies? Whichever way, they obviously function on artists

(during training, for example) but also artists can stand back and make decisions about how to go on from amongst the possibilities offered by traditions, thus changing the traditions by their mature art, which then becomes part of a transformed tradition. This balance of "social being" and "consciousness" seems to be the usual form of the biographies which fill the text of *Australian Painting*.

Secondly, in the above formulation, European tradition clearly predominates, implying a dependent, provincial, imitative character in most Australian art. This is reflected in the internal organisation of each chapter: an art historical category is introduced with an account of its leading ideas, then encapsulated life-and-work summaries of relevant artists follow. But the tensions created between individual and tradition, and Australian vis-a-vis European, are also reflected in the overall organisation of the material. The biographical capsules, style descriptions and sections on art institutions are sorted into chapters according to a variety of principles:

- The colonial period is presented in terms of how Europeans saw the new environment (following Smith's magnificent *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Melbourne: O.U.P., 1960) and the practical realism of the mid-nineteenth century (paralleling the egalitarianism of the "Australian Legend").²⁶

- The 1880s to 1920s period is sectionalised according to artists' travels arranged in biblical themes of birth (the Heidelberg School), exile and return.

- The 1920s and 1930s-1940s has the rise of modernism as its major focus, with socialist realism considerably diluted.

- The later 1940s and 1950s is preoccupied with the debates between the (Melbourne) Antipodeans and the (Sydney) abstractionists.

During the 1960s and 1970s various updates and selective elaborations of Smith's fundamental work were published. Most important was the second edition of *Australian Painting* (1971), which left the original edition almost entirely unaltered but added four new chapters, expanding the length of the book by a quarter, on tendencies in painting in the 1960s. The methodology remained substantially unchanged. Robert Hughes's *Art of Australia* (written 1966, rewritten for first publication in 1970) attempted to rework Smith's research in a more critically alive style, and to emphasise Hughes's own area of involvement - Sydney abstraction in the late 1950s, early 1960s --- against Smith's rejection of it, but did both rather weakly. Something of the intelligent conservatism (of Donald Horne's *Bulletin*, for example) enters his language but not his historical perceptions.²⁷ *Australian Painting* became the basis for most historical accounts, for the essays in the picture books which flourished in the 1970s, and was taken for granted by critics in their weekly reviewing. It also set the framework for detailed art historical research. This situation remains largely the case today.

5. The Visual Arts within Australian High Culture.

Geoffrey Serle's *From Deserts the Prophets Come* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1973) is a compilation of ideas from the

orthodox survey texts in each of the arts into an evolutionary narrative within the "left-liberalism" tendency mentioned above. Its essentially bourgeois conception of culture - that is, as professional achievement in each of the separate high arts strung together with additions such as liberal academic studies and a cultivated lifestyle - limits its usefulness, but it does at least survey some of the connections. Its methodology is often odd: the 1920s to 1940s is characterised as a period of "delayed development" partly on the grounds that Serle counts up the number of good novels written during this period compared to others and finds it wanting! There are some thoughts on how high cultural developments relate to major economic and ideological changes but these are conceived as peripheral.

Serle's example has not been followed in any major way (although see the continuing project of magazines such as *Meanjin*). Studies of individual artists have sometimes paid attention to connections across the arts, especially when they have to, as in the case of Norman Lindsay, for example. John Docker's *Australian Cultural Elites* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974) is a much clearer approach to the internal dialectics of high culture.

6. Recent Developments.

During the past decade, a variety of approaches has questioned the assumptions behind these ways of doing art history. This is because the orthodoxies (the dominant one is that discussed under "Europe vis-a-vis Australia" above) have been unable to absorb the growing body of work continually unearthed by researchers, and because of various newly-prominent social and political demands which have been made of all intellectual work. There are five of these; together, they demand that we reconceive the subject and our methods.

The first two are present, in a strong sense, by the different ways in which they are absent.

(a) *Social context*

The "left-liberalism" tradition pointed to elements of the social context outside of artworlds as of importance to understanding high cultural production. It has become conventional to make at least some reference along these lines vide *Australian Painting* but not the swarm of books which take this text as their basic reference -although these are usually contained within the inherited frameworks of biography, style and institutional influences. Social and ideological factors are usually seen as additional aids to aesthetic interpretation, as something coming into play before and after artmaking itself. This approach is more developed in art history writing outside Australia, and more developed for periods prior to the twentieth century. It has influenced, for example, Graeme Sturgeon's *The Development of Australian Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), but no single Australian art history text stands as a clear example of it.

(b) *Black.*

Most strikingly absent from Australian art history writing is a consciousness of the continuing contribution of aboriginal and minority group artists. Aboriginal people feature as a subject for art during the colonial period, and occasionally later, or selected examples of their work are compressed into token, extra sections and seen as

"primitive art". Recently, an awareness of cultural difference has prompted publication of collections of images of the ways the two "races" see each other -- for example, Geoffrey Dutton, *White on Black* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1974).

The whole question of the relationships between black and white Australian artists needs to be explored. So does the broader question of the influence on white cultural consciousness of the particular presence of a subjugated but distinct, alien culture in our midst the kinds of feeling evoked in Katharine Susannah Pritchard's *Coonardoo* and Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. Equally, more studies of Aboriginal artmaking, writing, poetry, cultural work need to be done by Aborigines.²⁸

(c) *Women.*

Recently, certain women artists and art historians have stressed the relative banishment of women artists from histories of Australian art and the patronising views expressed when they are included: for example, Bernard Smith's accounting for the strength of women artists in the 1920s and 1930s by reference to the fact that many men who might have become artists were killed during World War 1.²⁹ A strong beginning to the recovery of positions for women artists was made by Janine Burke in her exhibition *Australian Women Artists: 1840-1940*, Melbourne University, 1975, continued in the magazine *Lip* and by the *Women's Show, Experimental Art Foundation*, Adelaide 1979.³⁰

(d) *The high visual arts in relation to more "popular" visual forms.*

Objections to the elitist, class character of the distinction between the high and the popular arts, as well as the increase in economic value of craft and mass-produced objects during the "nostalgia" booms, have led a massive increase in the range of cultural products considered worthy of valuing, studying, and exploring historically.

One form which this interest takes is examining the connections between the "high" and the "popular" in the concrete cases where, say, painters worked as illustrators or photographers, or where painters were influenced as to subject or treatment by the more public media. There is no history of these sorts of connection; it has to be pieced together by following through studies of artists such as Norman Lindsay and Noel Counihan. Its outlines are indicated in the essays by Peter Quartermain, Nigel Lendon, Ian Burn and Terry Smith in Anthony Bradley and Terry Smith, eds., *Australian Art and Architecture* (Melbourne: O.U.P., 1980).³¹

The other form taken by this interest is to treat the "popular" forms independently, exploring their internal histories. On cartooning, for example, see Marguerite Mahood, *The Loaded Line* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1973) for a sound coverage of the period up to 1901. In *The Bitter Fight* (Brisbane: Queensland University Press, 1970), Joe Harris provides a pictorial history of the labour movement, using a lot of imagery produced by and about the movement, but does not aim to write a history of the imagery. The women's movement has inspired important studies of women's craftwork. The history of Australian craft, including both domestic and work utensils and decorative objects, has yet to be written. A start was made by Murray Walker in the exhibition, *Colonial Crafts of*

Victoria, National Gallery of Victoria, 1978. The essays collected in *Australian Popular Culture* (see note 4 above) are all particular studies of an event or a cultural form during a certain period, arranged chronologically but not amounting to a history.

Of all the visual arts, film has been the object of the most intensive and productive theoretical work during the past fifteen years. It also, currently, functions as a "cultural flagship", somewhat as painting did in the early 1960s. The effects of this work on film criticism is marked; its influence on film history is equally profound but is less frequently and publicly visible, Eric Reade's popular celebrations of our film history are being revised by the scholarship of Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, among others. Their essential work has permitted John Tulloch to deploy various theoretical strategies in his study of the early period of local film production.³²

(e) Marxism.

The only history of Australian art written from a Marxist viewpoint is, as we have seen, *Place, Taste and Tradition*. Marxism here has developed greatly since the mid-1940s, deeply influencing various historical projects as well as posing, since the late 1960s, the ideological as a level of struggle with its own demands. Amongst the historical projects worthy of note are the "revisionist" histories of writers such as, Humphrey McQueen, and the political economy developed around Ted Wheelwright and others.³³ Ideological work has gone on in many places, particularly in tertiary institutions and in journals such as *Arena* and *Intervention*. Much that is relevant to Australian visual cultures appears in these projects, although specific studies are certainly not given the priority they deserve, Marxist studies of significant moments in the history of Australian art are few, but they are increasing. Humphrey McQueen's *The Black Swan of Trespass* is the major work to date; essays include those by Lendon, Burn and Smith in *Australian Art and Architecture* mentioned above.

There is, admittedly, an artificiality in listing these approaches without acknowledging just how logically and politically distinct they are. Their diversity indicates the variety of sources from which they come - they have in common only that they originate *outside* art and art history, The list is a list of effects. But these effects have, together, expanded our subject in significant ways: on one level, by insisting that we look at a wider variety of media, carrying images produced at all levels of society, and on another, by insisting that our analyses be guided by an awareness of class, gender and race as cultural determinants. Only in this way can we recognise the importance of the visual within Australian society, the power of certain sorts of imagery, the ubiquity of others. Our method needs to be open to this richness, as well as precise about its specific instances. This holds as surely for what should be our response to Charles Conder as to the Waterside Workers' Film Unit. A materialist art history needs to work past static plurality implied the multiplying categories of recent intellectual work towards a methodology which is coherent without being coercive, deconstructive but not indiscriminate, and above all generative of socially useful knowledge.

III

In distinguishing these six moments I have emphasised causes which might be thought of as "internal". Each of the histories are described as different responses to changes in Australian art, shifts in local social ideologies, developments in education, publication and promotion and to changes in ways of writing Australian history. However, given the inequalities of dependence, many "external" factors were also influential - indeed, they are frequently experienced as themselves internal, making the distinction a qualified one. In this part I want to explore some of the ways in which tendencies in art historical practice in Europe, England and the United States have structured the practice here. Again, these are first thoughts on the subject.

Generally speaking, the iconographic program of scholars such as Aby Warburg, Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky - tracing the nuances of the persistences of classical models as a key to subsequent imagery - has been most broadly influential as a model of practice, often irrespective of the object of study. Its standard procedures have set the shape of most of what we might call "normal" art history here - as they have in England and the United States since World War II. Much less conspicuous have been the more inventive, even "revolutionary", aspects of early twentieth century German art history: the global systematising, the iconological subtlety and the engagement with contemporary art.³⁴ But these aspects have had some impact, for example in the monograph on Arthur *Boyd* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967) by Franz Philipp. On the other hand, the complex relations between neoclassic order and romantic fantasy, so typical a concern of English art history, were focused for many of us by Professor Sir Joseph Burke's work on eighteenth-century art, although his interest in design (perhaps a product of the twentieth-century English dream of a reconstructed welfare democracy) found little purchase here.³⁵

Yet neither the "German" nor the "English" ways of doing art history seemed to find Australian art a consistently productive subject, although their dominance of normal art history in general usually structured basic research in the field. But a combination of elements of these approaches, when activated by the humanist modernism of Marxist art historians of the 1930s, inspired the early work of Bernard Smith. We have seen them collide in *Place, Taste and Tradition*. It is in *European Vision and the South Pacific* where they get to work, contributing to what now looks like a heroic project to rewrite the history of visual imagery in Australia from a perspective adequate to its rich complexity.³⁶ A quite other type of engagement emerged much later, in Donald Brook's application of the philosophy of language, particularly as developed in England by Wittgenstein and followers, to questions in the theory of art and in regular art criticism. The emphasis here is on current art conceived as a theory producing practice, and on the past as it appears to the present.³⁷

Any history of the professional methodologies of art history in Australia since World War II would, I submit, have to take something like this web of tendencies as constitutive.³⁸ They are shared between individual practitioners and, indeed, coexist "within" certain people, often in apparently paradoxical ways. On the other hand, some tendencies which have achieved high profiles in art criticism have failed to produce histories, even period studies. Most striking here is formalism, a dominant critical tendency in the later 1960s and early 1970s, but perhaps too

committed to conceptions of an avant-garde of immanent formal innovation and the spontaneity of individualistic creativity to be capable of the broad, complex perspectives and the empirical detail essential to historical work.

Art historical method here is not only influenced in fairly direct ways by local practitioners of various schools of, European and American art history. It is also, obviously, part of an international network which is organised through a variety of forms: associations, conferences, exchanges and, above all, reading each others' work in journals and books. The variety of possible approaches has, accordingly, increased in the past thirty years to such an extent that an account of present practice could only be a listing. (This will not stop me trying a certain path later in preference to this plurality.)

Yet there is another, more interesting kind of "external" pressure of a much less direct sort. It emerges in the way key regimes organise their effects, the ways certain questions are posed as important. This can be illuminated by taking one issue of definition which has exercised writers on art and examining the way it has been treated. Indeed, I propose to tackle the question which seems to preoccupy historians of Australian art: what was the nature of modernism? Recent period studies have focused between the wars, women artists of that moment have been celebrated, the Angry Penguins given unprecedented prominence, early advertising has become the first "popularising" visual medium, and design historians begin their inquiries. Modernity seems to have eclipsed all of the other concerns we have been tracing. It seems to be the key to the puzzle of the overall structure of the history of Australian art.

But is this so? We need be extremely careful about what kind of stylistic regime we are searching for – we cannot expect a transposed European coherency. The modern here seems ever-present but elusive, dominant but distant, pervasive but usually unspoken, a structure of assumptions rather than a wave of inspiration. I want to argue that we have to acknowledge the pressures on Australia of societies with modernising cultures but that our culture is not modernising in the same ways. None of the elements of the regime of the Modern go very deep here. Modernising ideologies of production, modern design and modernist avant-gardism are all present but they never constitute a deep, diverse or productive culture for any social group -- not even those involved in the arts, although we come closest to it. If this is so, then historians are not dealing with a local manifestation of a European modernity but with something which, however related, is distinctly different. Yet historians are constantly talking of modernism, especially recently. How can we account for this cacophony about apparently nothing, this incessant dialogue of presence/absence?

I have discussed elsewhere some of the disfigurements which occur when certain conceptions of modernity achieve hegemony within the writing of Australian art history.³⁹ We noted in the previous part of this article their continuing, expanding inroads since their first appearance in *Place, Taste and Tradition*. In this text an aestheticist, elitist modernism did battle with a localised realism of the German, Russian type. But at the same time, there entered unopposed a larger conception of modernism as an overriding and deep structure. "Modern Art" became inevitable

innovation through stylistic shifts sourced in the European, especially French, avant-garde. By the time of *Australian Painting* (1960) this larger conception had become an invisible normality, locking our art into successions of increasingly pale, provincialist imitations. The realist opposition had gone underground and the passion of the book was confined to the concluding chapters, a proud justification of the author's *Antipodean Manifesto* of 1959.

At the time and since many have read the *Manifesto* as a defence of a reactionary (Melbourne) figuration against a progressive (Sydney) abstraction, a provincial refusal to accept the inevitable advances of twentieth-century art. In the later 1960s it was seen as evidence that the only way to break the double binds of provincialism was through the energetic activity of a new, local avant-garde. Bernard Smith has subsequently understood the *Manifesto* as a defence of the achievements of the distinctively Australian artists of the 1940s (their artistic inventiveness, their social perception, their creation of a mythology for Australians) against the anonymity threatened by the American cultural invasion in all spheres of life.⁴⁰ He has most recently seen it as also a defence of the central values of modernism - indeed, of the larger, normal conception of European-type avant-gardism - against its (apparent) reduction, degradation, simplification and abuse by American and European nonfigurative painters and by their local imitators. The Australian and the European fuse when the work of the artists of the 1940s is recognised as a distinctive contribution to Modern Art, to the imaging of important aspects of modern life. The periphery, more alive and alert than the decaying, exhausted centre, restores power to it by revitalising its traditions, expanding its achievement.⁴¹ While the formulation of these interpretations is clearly quite recent, they throw light on that never satisfactorily explained moment, however much retrospectivity might be entailed.

These differing interpretations of one moment in the history of Australian art signal the complexity of art historical construction particularly when the broader tendencies need to be grasped. There is, I submit, a general trajectory in the Modern towards the accelerating creation of conditions of constant change in order to secure the standardisation, commodification and profitability of all social relationships. Within the domains of the visual the Modern seems to insist on new, simplified, clear criteria of legibility, a sweeping away of (now) older, diffuse, awkwardly connotative ways of seeing. These basic dynamics are evident in all "advanced" societies, in different ways and at different times. But art history still needs to account for the local specifics of this enterprise, its intermittent spectacular success, its capacity for displacement, and its constant small failures in its overall failure to dominate our seeing, our image-making.⁴²

The Modern is thus not some epochal social shift but an attempt at an ordering regime, at the institution of a particular gaze, the positioning of key relationships, projected in the interests of those with the most concentrated social power. Yet these sorts of regime work by both focusing and dispersing power simultaneously (somewhat like the arbitration system sorting power in industrial relations). Modernism within the visual arts in Australia does not have a consistent, self-perpetuating history. It is not a sequence of waves within a continuous, inevitably unfolding progression. Rather, we can decipher a series of effects within art resulting mostly from attempts to secure the

regime of the Modern in the society at large:

(i) From the later 1880s through to the first decade of the twentieth century there are frequent but intermittent dislocations of the genre-based, narrative picturing assumed in most paintings by sudden loose handling, "free" colour, loss of line. This is evident in the 9 by 5 Impressions, in the bush fantasies of Charles Conder, Arthur Streeton and Sydney Long, in John Peter Russell's French work, in the paintings of E. P. Fox and Ethel Carrick and, particularly, in Frederick McCubbin's later paletteknifing, in Elioth Gruner's excessive light and paint texture. It is striking in the oil sketches and the underpainting of both these artists and those aiming at more conventional finish - for example, George Lambert. Little of this is conscious modernism, although it testifies to the impact and persistence of the Aesthetic movement. Rather, it might reveal the impact on naturalistic artists of the paradox of realism: how attempts to "get it right" can release the means of representation to an unexpected freedom.⁴³ The contradictions at work here are typical of the period, they were thought of as "modern" at the time, but they are not overtly modernist.

(ii) A Moderne style in fashion, design, architecture and publicity in the 1920s, not matched by Post-Impressionist explorations in art, including the few abstract experiments, but met indirectly by the increase in compositional simplification and the heavier brushing of Landscape School artists such as Streeton and Gruner, and by the exaggerated tonalism of Max Meldrum, Clarice Beckett and others.

(iii) An updating of French avant-gardism in the private art schools in Sydney and Melbourne in the 1930s,⁴⁴ as well as by a critical humanist perception of "modern life" as now degraded but potentially a (technological) utopia, this latter evident in the work of certain National Gallery School graduates and those associated with political parties. Both elements asserted the priority of the modern, but in dramatically different ways, as the 1942 split in the Contemporary Art Society shows.

(iv) From the later 1930s certain refugees from fascist, war-torn Europe bring the dream of a lively, experimental culture, absolutely modern, but committed to freedom of expression and freedom from social conflict.

(v) The pervasive institution of U.S.-style commodity consumerism in the 1950s and 1960s is the obvious basis for the impact of quite different modernisms of U.S. painting. Abstract Expressionism and then hard-edge, colour painting and formalist criticism.

(vi) The profound, often crippling questioning of 1960s modernism here, and of the entire "modernist tradition" in the U.S. and Europe during the 1970s, was accompanied by the expansion of institutional support structures ideal for such art but awkwardly placed to serve the more critical developments which ensued.

(vii) Now (surprise! surprise!) modernism is being "revived" by a combination of nostalgia (New Expression, New Painting) and typically avant-gardist self-immolation (Post-Modernism), both of which reenact overseas survival strategies. The latest edition is, however, surpassingly local - it positively insists on the extremity of its peripherality, it depends for inspiration on random meetings of an extremely sophisticated semiotic searching with the irredemiably

popular and ordinary.⁴⁵

Each of these "modernisms" is markedly ignorant of previous moments. Usually, there will be a vague sense that some sort of battle for Modern Art is being, or has been, successfully fought - although the 1970s questioning dislodged this certainty for many. Such amnesia accurately indicates the arbitrary nature of these "modernisms" in Australia, their relatively loose and temporary grip. The modern takes hegemonic hold here in proportion to its degree of generalisation. Despite its reappearances as "new style", it is effective mostly as a framework of assumptions rather than as a detailed practice, and is active mostly in contiguity with some other, more specifically local regimes, for example, the various realisms and regionalisms.

Is this kind of partial purchase on "the Modern" true for other cultural regimes? Or is it rather that, in the absence of a modernising culture, a gap emerges between the pressures of societies with such cultures and the modernisms which, we have seen, so frequently but so intermittently surface here? It is in this "gap" that other regimes compete for the critical middle-ground, the constantly changing battlelines between the elitist and the popular, between the class cultures which structure our society. During the 1950s and 1960s this struggle was, on my account above, somewhat stalemated into a post-*Australian Painting* orthodoxy. Subsequently, the social movements of the 1970s made specific political demands, only some of which have been met. There is an obvious need for a further overhaul of our revisory apparatus. Thus the reconception currently going on, with which I began this article.

We have already noted some of the factors which have forced this questioning. Recent political and social consciousness has led to a widespread desire for a more independent Australian culture. The critique of modernism continues, even extending to an undermining of representation itself within artistic practice. And, within the practice of art history, a parallel and related revision has been undertaken by the development known as the "social history of art" or "radical art history". I will continue our historiographical emphasis by characterising this tendency, offering some criticisms of it, and then drawing out some suggestions for the kind of art historical practice which, it seems to me, is needed today.

Reacting to what was seen as the elitist complacency and the untheoretical timidity of orthodox art history, and to what was seen as the mechanical determinism of earlier Marxist art history, a revision of the discipline was set in motion in the late 1960s. It paralleled, in many ways, the questioning of their own practices by conceptual artists, by younger historians and philosophers of science and by a variety of those concerned with linguistics. It was, obviously, a reaction to the social demands of that moment. The most influential work of this kind was done from the perspective of Marxist structuralism, particularly that being developed in France. In *Art History and Class Struggle* Nicos Hadjinicolaou draws on traditional political economy and an Althusserian analysis of ideology to set out a "science" of art history, the object of which is the production of pictures within the visual ideologies of particular classes and class fractions, in relation to general visual ideologies of periods.⁴⁶ T. J. Clark's study of Courbet and

Salon criticism exemplifies a method which explores an artist's generation of meaning as part of a critical discourse, in this case involving a political intervention aimed at activating the visual imagery in use by competing class fractions.⁴⁷ This kind of approach has been influential in many places, not only in quite specific ways, but also in the more general sense of drawing many art historians towards a greater, if often relatively unpolitical, concern with social meaning.

Although unequalled as a method for studying single artworks and groups of artists, certain limitations in this approach are becoming apparent, suggesting the need to modify, augment and perhaps revise it. It is subject to some of the critiques of structuralism in general -- particularly of the static, *sectional* character of the social models in use. Three problems are specific to its deployment in art history. Recent debates have underlined how deeply embedded is the assumption that the crucial cultural struggle of the past century and a half has been that between realism and modernism.⁴⁸ Whether this is the case - or, perhaps, how it has been and might be conceived as the case needs careful scrutiny. Secondly, key radical art history texts have constructed a history of previous art history leading up to themselves as solutions, with some odd results. For example, the work of predecessors such as Frederick Antal, Francis Klingender and Max Raphael, as well as that of ideological opponents such as Ernst Gombrich, is devalued.⁴⁹ Selective positioning is unavoidable in historiography. This article is no exception -- indeed, such positioning is its subject. Finally, and most importantly, the focus on individual works and on individual artists acting in specific conjunctures tends against two different sorts of necessary generalisation: those which permit the perception of developments through time (that is, diachronic historical structures) and those which pick up the production of meanings across the multiple signifying practices of a society.⁵⁰

This last is the object of *cultural studies*, particularly as it has developed in England, again, since the late 1960s. Initially an amalgam of critical sociology, literary studies and "history from below", it has evolved through complex pathways into what is now perhaps best describable as a set of positions from which to theorise other disciplines/ practices.⁵¹ Cultural studies work on visual representation has been intermittent but nonetheless suggestive. It has appeared within work on representation in general, on sexuality, on media and on art.⁵² Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* extends the culturalist analysis of post-war British (male) youth subcultural style beyond conceptions of style as expression. Responding to Julia Kristeva's argument for avant-gardism as revolutionary work on language, Hebdige argues that subordinate group style can display a relationship to both parent (respectable working class) and dominant (bourgeois) cultures based on both contestation and displacement. In punk style, for example, this was signified not only by the deliberate "mis-use" of previously valued or feared symbols, but particularly in the ways in which elements were related. Arbitrary collaging typified the design of dress and record covers, and was paralleled in the productive disorder of musical composition, of relations between bands and audiences and of spectacular public behaviour. Little of the symbolism directly expressed the material position of the subculture within capitalism the raw materials of style are constantly stylised, and restyled, in

order to stay separate. Punk exemplified the tendency of style to disengage, to tangentially reject its referents.⁵³ Such shifting ellipsis is characteristic of much visual art – in the newest modernism it is itself a subject.

The broad project of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* -- to extend the interpretive act of art criticism to revealing the processes through which our perceptions of the world are organised through imagery in the service of property and profit ("publicity") - has been influential, however much one might now wish to query its constituent arguments.⁵⁴ Similarly, Ariel Dorfmann and Armand Mattelart's *How To Read Donald Duck*, a study of the global ideological influence of Disney Inc., remains an exemplary product of its moment: Chile during the short-lived Popular Front period.⁵⁵ These texts start to mark out a subject wider in scope although just as penetrative as even the "social history of art". Beyond art, but certainly including it, we need a *social history of seeing, of imaging (image-making)*. Our focus need no longer be only the "high" or "fine" arts but the ways in which the plethora of visual signifying practices work to structure the social meaning of seeing, to produce particular readings of images, to ensure the reproduction of desired relationships, to secure the changes necessary to their continued potency. We can trace how the forces of class, gender and race contend, how many of the major and minor issues of Australian life are shaped in and through visual forms - from paintings to packaging, from souvenirs to "sights". We are studying instances of the micro-circulation of power; the sometimes strident, sometimes muffled, yet incessant struggle for the *power to represent*, to have a "voice", to *appear*. I also suspect that much of our "private" self-imaging is similarly sorted through visual imagery, although this is, of course, only accessible to the historical gaze in its "public" forms.⁵⁶

How has this sort of approach worked in practice? It has been, and still is, a rather slow and painful process. A variety of approaches are evident in the sometimes convergent work of people at the N.S.W. Institute of Technology and at Griffith, La Trobe, N.S.W., and Sydney Universities. In the course at Sydney mentioned above we have tried many techniques. Attempts to reconstruct aspects of the visual culture of the 1930s through oral history failed, although we did recognise the potency of repeated, media pictures of the period in structuring people's *memories* of nonspecifically visual aspects of the period. We have had more success with the analysis of newspapers and films from the 1920s and 1930s. We have tested various models for their usefulness as frameworks for image-analysis: for example, reading the ideological connotations of an image by locating it at the historically specific site of various social contradictions such as class, sex, race, city/country, work/recreation (the image as a product of, and as requiring a reading in terms of a "resolution" of, one or more of these contradictions), then tracing its incidence, development and transformations within a particular medium through a period. Although artificially determinist in conception, some very interesting work has emerged - on, for example, the class-contrasting roles of *The Home* and the *Women's Weekly* in the 1930s, on the ideology of *The Daily Telegraph*, on historical reconstructions in recent films.

A number of difficulties are already obvious. There has been a tendency to focus on more obvious (although more neglected) representations of social ideologies, such as political cartoons and news photographs, unfortunately

at the expense of more thoroughly mediated but just as interesting representations, such as those in high art. There is also a tendency to switch back and forth between analysing ideological figures in depth to tracing structural *patterns* over time: for example, the Little Boy at Manly compared to the shifts from colonial allegory to the current curious absence of a striking cartoon figure of Australia, or, in painting, say Heysen's 1920s Flinders Ranges paintings compared to the imaging of Australia as landscape over many years (or, more accurately, of certain relationships to the land as distinctively Australian).⁵⁷ But these difficulties are, I think, being overcome in some of the work being done.

One rewarding approach seems to be that which seeks to display pathways of power through close studies of particular moments of cultural conflict. John Storey and I found that work we had been doing on the history of May Day and on the produce displays at the Sydney Royal Easter Show came together in a way which did not evoke the false spectre of "popular culture" when we decided to look at both in relation to the Sesquicentenary Celebrations of 1938. Against the two great official celebrations, the March to Nationhood and the March of Industry and Commerce, the May Day march turned its shared form - a series of floats - into a counterdemonstration of the *labour* history of Australia. The produce displays retained their usual declarative content - Australia Plenty (despite the drought of that year) - but changed their format into large, imposing spectacles (more like the ones we know today) as part of the Show's response to the new pressure of the rising manufacturing industries.⁵⁸

If we look at visual imagery in Australia in terms of this kind of struggle in representation, as a constant battle for the power to appear, then new subjects become visible, new questions become pressing. What would a history of Aborigines' representations of whites be like? How has Aboriginal imagery, in all its regional forms, changed since 1770 - or 1606 - or earlier? Have we this century created a "transitional culture", akin to those being manufactured in Africa and Canada?⁵⁹ Something more accurate and focused than the generalised guilt of *White on Black* is necessary in the study of the imagery of racism. How was transportation in particular and Australia in general seen in British visual culture in the late eighteenth century? Are not the conceptions of the South Pacific as a "field for botanising" and a regrettable Botany Bay too reduced when we acknowledge the experimentalism of eighteenth-century Europe - politically, economically, in science, medicine and in punishment and discipline - and does this not recharge the "European vision"? If the colonies were "Hell on Earth", not only stepping-stones to petty bourgeois respectability but also death/labour camps, then why is the imagery of the period so quiescent? And so it goes, right through up to the present and right across the culture, questions like these -- as well as quite local, individual, "small focus" ones - are being asked. Nor is this questioning confined to critics and historians: it is as much a concern of artists and community workers forming a key subject in many films, murals, plays, paintings, posters and comics.⁶⁰ Art historians can learn much in such direct engagement with the genesis/reworking of imagery.

All this makes engagement in searching out the histories of Australian visual cultures a fascinating project. Questioning the overriding orthodoxies opens space for the appearance of the histories of the "powerless". It can

also "free" those caught by dominant definitions. The more voices speaking historically, the more possibility there is for invention and growth, in both artmaking and in art criticism, history and theory, now and in the future.

IV

Walking recently through Sydney's largest retail store, Myer's, I was pleased to see that the most prominent stand in the ground-floor book section was "Australian Art". It stood on the central aisle, across from a bargain table, and it preceded "Australiana" and "Best Sellers". Displayed on the top shelf were Sandra McGrath and John Olsen, *The Artist and the Desert*, Bay 1981 (\$39.95); *A Treasury of Australian Art from the David Levine Collection*, Rigby 1981 (\$30); Eugene Lumbers, *The Art of Pro Hart*, Rigby 1971, reprint 1981 (\$1 1.50); Elaine Godden and Jutta Malnic, *Rock Paintings of Aboriginal Australia*, Reed 1982 (\$49.95). On the second shelf stood Susan Bruce, *A Treasury of Australian Painting*, Rigby 1979 (\$10.50); Paul White, *Pro Hart's Legendary Tasmania*, Rigby 1982 (\$12.50); James Gleeson, *Australian Painters: Colonial, impressionists, Modern*, Lansdowne 1976, 4th impression 1981 (\$20.00); Phillip Geeves Presents *Cazneaux's Sydney, 1901-1934*, David Ell 1980 (\$18.50); John Larkins and Bruce Howard, *Australian Pubs*, Rigby 1973, 1980 (\$12.50). On the lower shelves were found Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, Allen Lane 1981 (\$39.95); Kym Bonython, *Modern Australian Painting 1975-80*, Rigby 1980 (\$22.50); Ronald and Catherine Berndt, *Aboriginal Art: A Visual Perspective*, Methuen 1982 (\$27.95); William Splatt and Susan Bruce, *100 Masterpieces of Australian Landscape Painting*, Currey O'Neil 1981 (\$12.50); William Splatt and Barbara Burton, *A Treasury of Australian Landscape Painting*, Currey O'Neil 1977 (\$8.95); Vincent and Carol Serventy, *Australian Landforms*, Rigby 1981 (\$10.50); Alison Small, *Art and Artists of Australia*, Macmillan Pocket Guide, Obelisk 1981 (\$7.95). Covers usually featured sections of bright, sunny Heidelberg landscapes, mostly Streeton, sometimes McCubbin. Nearly all the publishers are Australian, although some are local offices of multinationals.

Such a display may be transient, exceptional, even idiosyncratic. But it triggers certain speculations about popular conceptions of Australian art -- at least as they are conceived by aggressive and successful publishers such as Rigby. The landscape remains the definitive subject, and the form it was supposedly given by the "Heidelberg School" painters remains its distinctively Australian form. Most of the texts do not reach too far beyond this constantly reiterated theme. When they do it is to elaborate anecdotes about the lives and feelings of certain artists, especially the youthful Streeton. The modernist moments in Australian art are conscripted into this framework as modernisations of the landscape (Drysdale) or as new ways of living as an artist (Whiteley). Often, however, this is an awkward process, so it is left to the "serious" studies and the more expensive texts. (Not that any of the books on display could be said to be cheap: already an "art book" is a special, deeply considered purchase for many.) The one scholarly text on display was *Rebels and Precursors*, reflecting, perhaps, the unprecedented publicity accorded the book, or the extension of the canon to include such now ubiquitous "old masters" as Sidney Nolan. Not one of the other books discussed in this article was even stocked by this store, although many of them are available in city bookshops.

It is the popular, publisher-concocted picture books which process Australian art for large publics into digestible instances of the artist as hero, the bush as beautiful, and both artist and landscape as distinctively Australian. "History" is simply the sequence, the given pathways through this relatively seamless story that is, it is not history but mythology. Hangings in public galleries and media statements by experts move uneasily between this story and the narrative of official art history. Still largely orchestrated by *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, this history works, as we have seen, through biographic encapsulations and some commentary on the artworks – something strenuously avoided in the popular texts. The commentary is usually confined, however, to source-pointing and shorthand characterisations, especially stylistic ones, in the context of noting changes in the supporting institutions of art. Structurally, it is not so different from the popular story of Australian art. It differs mostly in explanatory style. Above all, it processes artists and interpretations for the popular story while at the same time maintaining, in its "internal" forums (journals, conferences, small edition books), the complexities necessary to distance it from the popular. Nonetheless, here this divided discourse is conducted in a language less separated and class-distinct than the equivalent art history in England.⁶¹

An elitist attitude towards the servicing of the popular would be self-defeating. So would resigned submission to it, no matter how refined its versions. Our work just is located across these contending sites; we have no choice but to constantly negotiate them. The desiderata for histories of Australian visual cultures proposed here are suggestions for critical pathways within this situation. They are neither "elitist" nor "popular", subject to neither orthodox art history, the dictates of the art-market nor the priorities of publishers. As we widen the scope of our work, we need to watch carefully that the material is not crudely packaged in Rigby-type reductions. And we need to be just as wary of reacting backwards into the leatherbound arms of expensive taste. Both devalue a diverse and developing field of art historical work.

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NOTES:

1. A major fruit of such work should be *The Necessity of Australian Art*, by Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen, forthcoming.
2. Published in 1966, first edition pulped due to complaints about certain statements and the author's distaste for "its more egregious naivetes" (Preface 1969, 2nd ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).
3. Although its emphasis on the aestheticist tendencies in Australian painting makes it very much a product of a taste formed partly by abstract painting of the 1960s, This is even clearer in the second edition (1980).

4. Graham Sturgeon, *The Development of Australian Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978); Ken Scarlett, *Australian Sculptors* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1980); Janine Burke, *Australian Women Artists* (Melbourne: Greenhouse, 1980); Peter Spearitt and David Walker, *Australian Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1979); Richard White, *inventing Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

5. For example, Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944* (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Cooperative, 1979), reviewed by Bernard Smith, *Meannn*, 38 no. 4 (Dec. 1979), Terry Smith, *Australian Left Review*, no. 77 (Sept. 1981); and Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years in Australian Art* (London: Allen Lane, 1981), reviewed B. Smith, *Age Monthly Review*, I, no. 6 (Oct. 1981), C. Merewether, *National Times*, Oct. 25-30, 1981, T. Smith, *Overland*, no. 86 (Dec. 1981),

6. Mark Roskill, *What is Art History?* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976); Erwin Panofsky, "Three Decades of Art History in the United States" (1953) in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday, 1955); Udo Kultermann, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte; der Weg eine Wissenschaft* (Vienna: Leon, 1966).

7. Respectively, "History of Art", in *The Humanities in Australia*, ed. A. Grenfell Price (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1959); "Bibliographical Essay on Art Historical Studies since 1958", *Proceedings of the Australian Academy of the Humanities* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1974); "The Teaching of Fine Arts at Australian Universities", *The Australian University*, 13, no. 1 (May 1975), 8-18, and "Art Historical Studies in Australia", *Proceedings of the Australian Academy of the Humanities*, forthcoming.

8. Bernard Smith, ed., *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia: The Colonial Period* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975), ix.

9. Respectively, "What Should Australian Artists Paint?", *The Australasian Critic*, I, no. 1 (Oct. 1890), 21-22 (in *ibid.*, 247-51), and "An Aim for Australian Art", *Centennial Magazine*, I, no. 1 (Aug. 1888), 31-32.

10. Respectively, "The Fine Arts in Australasia", *Australasian Art Review* (May-Aug. 1899); "Notes on Early Australian Artists", *Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 8 parts, vols. 5-9, 1919-1923, various pages; *City Sketches* (Melbourne: 1905). I. I. Smith, *Documents*, 211-19.

12. The tendency towards constructing a vision of Australian typicality through an imagery of the remembered past is obvious in such paintings as Tom Roberts's *Bailed Up* (1895) and in McCubbin's "pioneer legend" series. It is less obvious to us now than it was to contemporaries that apparently "pure" landscapes such as those both entitled *Golden Summer* and painted in 1888 by Arthur Streeton and David Davies were similarly historicising. A number of quite distinct nationalist "moments" can be distinguished in Australian art between the 1880s and the 1920s. For a preliminary discussion see my "Teaching Art History: Arthur Streeton's Stiff Glides the Stream", *Creativity in Art Education* (Sydney: Art Education Society of N.S.W., 1982) conference papers. See also Ian Burn, "Beating about the Bush: Landscapes of the Heidelberg School", in A. Bradley and T. Smith, eds., *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), and his "Painting, Interpreting and Other Hazards", *Art Network*, no. 6 (Winter 1982), 42-44.

13. Respectively, "The Trend of Australian Art Considered and Discussed", *Art and Architecture* (Jan. 1905); "Some Remarks on the History of Australian Art", in *The Art of Frederick McCubbin* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1916); both cited in Smith, *Documents*, 269-81. Streeton was more generous to Roberts in the catalogue of his 1913 Melbourne exhibition (see Moore, *The Story of Australian Art*, I, 93).

14. See the notes by McCubbin and the articles by Ann Galbally and Leigh Astbury, *La Trobe Library Journal*, 6, no. 24 (Oct. 1979).

15. The quotations are from, respectively, C. W. E. Bean, in *Your Hands Australians* (London: Cassell, 1918), 13-14, and Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1954).

16. See A. A. Longden, "The Art of Empire", in *The British Empire: A Survey*, ed. H. Gunn (London: British Books, 1924), 266-69, an amusing concoction of received knowledge and, perhaps, a response to the Australian exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1923. Other important examples of this view include George Galway, *Fifty Years of Australian Art 1879-1929* (Sydney: Royal Art Society, 1929); J. S. MacDonald, *Australian Painting Desiderata* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1958);

Lionel Lindsay, *Addled Art* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942).

17. Moore was art and drama critic for newspapers in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane during the first forty years of this century. The *City Sketches* collect his Melbourne experiences, *The Story* reflects more the perspective of someone closely associated with the Sydney art scene. This basis in regular journalism links him with earlier writers and later popularisers, such as James Gleeson, rather than with trained art historians such as Bernard Smith, who found *The Story* "as history . . . unsatisfactory". This judgement, from the introduction to *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945), indicates a concern with applying professional standards to writing the history of Australian art that Moore did not share.

18. Clear enough in the book, it is explicitly acknowledged in the 1979 preface and in the *Age Monthly Review* of Haese op. cit. There is commentary by Humphrey McQueen, *The Block Swon of Trespass*, 73-75. See also Charles Merewether, "Australian Artists and the Left", *Fuse*, 6, nos. 1 & 2 (May-Jun. 1982), 150-54,

19, Respectively, *British Imperialism and Australia 1788-833* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939); *How Labor Governs* (1923; Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964).

20. A point further developed in his chapter omitted at the behest of Sydney Ure Smith, but published in *The Communist Review* (June and July 1946) under the pseudonym "Goya".

21, This complexity was not recognised by H. E. Badham, whose 1949 history strives to restore the previously prevailing interpretation.

22, W. K. Hancock, *Australia* (1930; first Australian ed., Sydney: Australasian Pub. Co., 1945), 252.

23, C. Hartley Grattan, *introducing Australia* (1942; 2nd Australian ed., Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1949), 163.

24. *Meanjin*, 9 (Summer 1950), 259-62; also in his *The Australian Tradition; Studies in a Colonial Culture* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1958),

25. See H. McQueen, "Critic and Community, Some Recent Writings of Bernard Smith", *Meanjin*, 36, no. 1 (May 1977), 42-45.

26. Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958).

27. His "Painting" in Peter Coleman, ed., *Australian Civilisation* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962), is much more lively, and is part of a project organised politically against the "radical leftism" of Fitzpatrick, Gollan, Ward and others. See Tim Rowse, *Liberalism and the Australian National Character* (Melbourne: Kibble, 1978). Smith's comments on Hughes are in *Historical Studies*, 15, no. 61 (Oct. 1973), 777-80, and in the 1979 preface to *Place, Taste and Tradition*, 19.

28. Amongst many recent publications, see *Meanjin*, Dec, 1977; Geoff Bardon, *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1979); Jennifer Isaacs, ed., *Australian Dreaming* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1980); Aboriginal Arts Board, *Oenpelli Bark Painting* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1980).

29. *Australian Painting*, 198-99,

30. Subsequently a book, see n.4 above. The development of feminist art history relevant here is indicated in Julie Ewington's review, *Refractory Girl*, no. 22 (May 1981), 41-43.

31. A number of Articles by Leigh Astbury are important here, particularly, "The Heidelberg School and the Popular Image", *Art and Australia*, 17, no. 3 (March 1980), 263-66.

32. Eric Reade, *The Australian Screen* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1975) and *History and Heartburn* (London: Harper & Row, 1979); Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980); John Tulloch, *Legends on the Screen* (Brisbane: Currency Press, 1981), 33, Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) and *Social Sketches of Australia 1888-1975* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); E. Wheelwright and K. Buckley, *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*,

4 vols. (Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Book Co., 1975, 1978 and 1980); R. W. Connell and T. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History* (Melbourne: Longmans, 1980).

34. See my "Doing Art History", *The Fox*, no. 2 (1976), 97-104.
35. *English Art 17 f 4-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
36. With the marked exception of an Aboriginal perspective, something he sets out to remedy in the Boyer Lectures, *The Spectre of Truganini* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1980).
37. See, for example, *The Social Role of Art* (Adelaide: Experimental Art Foundation, 1977),
38. Others will, of course, see the situation differently. I make no apology for singling out those mentioned - they have been or still are my personal mentors, and I owe a great but different debt to each of them.
39. "A Science of Seeing", *Age Monthly Review*, I, no. 10 (Mar. 1982), 7-8, The editor's title, incidentally I would not make any claims of the sort such a title implies.
40. *Age Monthly Review*, I, no. 6 (Oct. 1981).
41. Lecture on Jack Lindsay, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, March 1982.
42. I elaborate these general remarks in "A Science of Seeing", *op. cit.*, and explore them in some detail in "Design and Revolution: Paris-Moscow 1900-1930", *Transition*, 2, no. 2 (June 1981), 32-36, and "Modernism and Visibility: The Power of Architecture", *ibid.*, 2, nos. 3 & 4 (Sept.-Dec. 1981), 16-22. They are further theorised in "Modernism", an occasional paper forthcoming from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.
43. See, for example, Charles Rosen and Henri Zemer, "What Is, and Is Not, Realism?", *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 18 and Mar. 4, 1982, 21-26 and 29-33.
44. As Bernard Smith notes in his forthcoming Australian Academy of the Humanities article, both the Melbourne and Sydney Fine Arts Departments were funded partly in order to promote "Modern Art" against local conservatism. Murdoch's bequest is consistent with his support of the 1939 exhibition of Modern French and British Art; John Power's with his experience as a Cubist painter in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. The concept of "Modern Art" constructed by j. S. MacDonald and Lionel Lindsay in their vehement attacks, especially in the late 1930s and 1940s, is yet another modernism with a long life in Australian culture.
45. See Richard Dunn, "The Pursuit of Meaning: A Strategy of Parts", *Art & Text*, no. 6 (1982), 16-30; Paul Taylor, Popism, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, July 1982; T. Smith, "Art, Social Context and Validation", *Art Network*, no. 7 (Aug. 1982), 41-43, and "Against the Grain: New Audiences and Changing Strategies in Australian Art", *Australian Art Review*, ed. Leon Paroissien (Sydney: Wamer, 1982), 128-32.
46. *Art History and Class Struggle* (Paris: Maspero, 1973; London: Pluto, 1978).
47. *Image of the People and The Absolute Bourgeois* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973).
48. See the debates between Peter Wollen and Clark in *Screen* during 1980, as well as Charles Harrison, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, "Mallet's Olympia and Contradiction", *Block*, no. 5 (1981), 34-43,
49. A criticism of two otherwise important essays: T.J. Clark, "The Conditions of Artistic Creation", *Times Literary Supplement*, May 24, 1974; John Tagg, "Marxism and Art History", *Marxism Today* (June 1977), 183-92,
50. Certain studies from within the "Social History of Art" go beyond its first phase, for example: Adrian Rifkin, "Cultural Movement and the Paris Commune", *Art History*, 2, no. 2 (June 1979), 201-20, and his "Can Gramsci Save Art History?", *Block*, no. 3 (1980), 35--40; Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Les Donnees Bretonnantes: La Prairie de Representation", *Art History*, 3, no. 3 (Sept. 1980), 314-44, and Griselda Pollock, "Vision, Voice and Power: Feminist Art History", *Block*, no. 6 (1982), 2-21.
51. Its sources in the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, as well as aspects of its subsequent development, are traced in Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (London: Hutchinson, 1980). A rather different proposal for its usefulness for Australian studies is John Colmer, "Australian Cultural Analysis: Some Principles and Problems", *Southerly*

(Sept. 1978), 242-52.

52. For example, Culture, Media, Language, Part III; Stuart Hall, "The Determination of News Photographs", *Cultural Studies*, no. 3 (1973); essays in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham, *On Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1978); essays by John Tagg and Frank Mort in *Screen Education*, no. 36 (Autumn 1980), 17-55 and 69-84.

53. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979). Hebdige follows Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals* (London: Hutchinson, 1976). A recent review of English cultural studies is *Screen Education*, no. 34 (Spring 1980), especially Angela McRobbie, 37-50. Critiques of punkabound, e.g., T. Parker and J. Burchill, *The Boy Looked at Johnny* (London: Pluto, 1978) and the film *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*.

54. *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Commission and Pelican, 1972); reviewed in special issue of *Art-Language*, 4, no. 3 (Oct. 1978).

55. (Chile 1971; New York: International General, 1975); David Kunzle, "The Parts that Got Left Out of the Donald Duck Book", *Marxism and Art History Session papers*, College Art Association Conference 1976 (papers available Art History Department, U. C. L. A., Calif.). See also Kunzle's survey of art in Chile under Allende in A. Millon and L. Nochlin, eds., *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979).

56. Again, a more extensive statement of this argument can be found in the *Age Monthly Review*, 1, no. 6 (Mar. 1982), 7-8.

57. See, for example, Ian Burn, n. 12 above.

58. "Two Other Sesquis: The Royal Easter Show and May Day 1938", *Australia 1938*, I (Feb. 1980), 48-65. This culturally conjunctural approach also informs my essay on Tom Roberts's *Shearing the Rams*, in A. Bradley and T. Smith, eds., *Australian Art and Architecture*, 99--123.

59. *Modern Kunst Aus Afrika*, Berliner Festspiele GmbH, June-August 1977 and *Art From Africa*, Commonwealth Institute, London, January--April 1981; Kenneth Coutts-Smith, "Australian Aboriginal Art", *Fuse*, 5, no. 6 (Mar. 1982) and *Art Network*, no. 7 (Aug. 1982), 52-55.

60. As I write (July 1982) a series of murals on the pylons under the Eastern Suburbs Railway, Sydney, are being "unveiled". By Michiel Dolk and Marilyn Fairskye, they tell a people's history of Woolloomooloo.

61. Compare Griselda Pollock, "Artists, Mythologies and Media: Genius, Madness and Art History", *Screen*, 21, no. 3 (1981), 57-96. The nature of the relations between art history and "popular" art writing needs further exploration, as does the large production and marketing of "naive" or "amateur" Australian art. This latter is a network much larger than, and apparently mostly independent of, the work taken to be the corpus of Australian art in all the texts I have discussed and in the popularisers listed in this section. Pro Hart's work would borderline the two cultures.

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