

ARTIST PROFILE



PETER KENNEDY
in the spotlight
& BONITA ELY

ISSUE 14.

www.artistprofile.com.au

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Aus \$16.95 NZ \$19.90



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Peter Kennedy and Glenn Barkley (Interview p52)

016

EDITOR'S NOTE

I HAVE BEEN extremely lucky to be part of the crew at ARTIST PROFILE from the first issue and it was without hesitation, and feeling very honored, I said yes to editing this issue of the magazine. I wouldn't say there is a fixed idea holding all the articles together but as the text came in a few different themes began to emerge.

It begins with the cover artist Peter Kennedy. Kennedy has steadfastly maintained a long-term practice of incredible intelligence that has moved in and out of currency. This artist, like all good artists, isn't interested in the trappings of success, style and profile-instead the focus has always been in making the best work he possibly can and bringing the audiences along with him without compromising the work's vision and sophistication. This is something all the artists in this issue have in common.

Kennedy was a pioneer of what we have come to call 'contemporary art'. Beginning his working life in the 1970s during the rise of 'post-object' practice, Kennedy was at the forefront. Over time, however, his work with light dissipated into the fabric of contemporary art. Only recently has it reemerged as a bright haze of technicolour.

This brings into the magazine itself the idea of disappearance-the marginal or the hidden-as an underlying theme of the articles by Steve Lopes, Greg O'Brien and Lucas Ihlein.

Linked to this (or at least I think so!) is a focus on female artists, from the work of the groundbreaking Bonita Ely, whose work over the past 40 years has been involved with both the environmental and feminist movements. And Ruth Waller, whose work also grew out of feminist and political activism but more recently finds itself involved with painterly concerns. In addition to this we look at the important work of

younger artists -Sydney based collective Brown Council, who draw upon 1970s video and performance legacies. And Melbourne based Indigenous artist Bindi Cole who documents the social and cultural complexities of diverse urban and remote Aboriginal communities.

An article on the 1976 Biennale of Sydney analyses the groundbreaking curatorial work of Tom McCullough and the influence that Korean art has on a re-reading of Australia's recent histories. Christen Cornell's article on Australian-Chinese artist Shen Shaomin presents an artist whose ambition and dual nationality, both local and global, has the chance to influence a new direction in Australian arts' future.

Anna Zagala's essay covers the recent trend of printmaking, finding itself stranded somewhere between the digital and analogue worlds. Following this, we close with a look at Sydney's Big Fag press whose printmaking workshop fits into a long tradition of radical print making touched upon by Zagala.

Throw into this mix articles on Belinda Fox and Ian North; and regular reviews and news from Dan Rule, Gillian Serisier, and editors Paul Flynn and Owen Craven and it makes for a heady read!

I used the words 'contemporary art' somewhat ironically but I hope this issue goes some way to demonstrating its polymorphous nature and unfixed definition.

In closing a big thanks to all the artists and writers who have agreed to contribute to the issue. A big thanks to Owen, Steve and Paul for the opportunity and all their hard work and support. I hope you enjoy the issue! ■

Glenn Barkley



TIMBURNS

Story Lucas Ihlein

MORE SHOWS OF LIVELY ART

SYDNEY, Mon: Showings of a nude couple on closed-circuit television will continue tomorrow as part of an exhibition by 46 artists at the N.S.W. Art Gallery.

Yesterday Barry John Prothero (28), student, of Chippendale, the male half of the exhibit, was arrested and charged with indecent exposure at the gallery.

Prothero, who is alleged to have exposed himself near the gallery's basement area, appeared today in the Sydney Central Court.

Sgt. R. Briddick said that representatives of the art gallery would be prosecuting the charge.

Prothero was remanded to November 26 on \$400 bail.

The director of the gallery, Mr Peter Laverty, said: "The incident is not connected with the work of art."

The work of art entitled "A change of plan" by Tim Burns, of Bronte, Sydney, consists of a television and sound viewing of a nude couple in a small room behind the screen. Viewers are encouraged to talk with the objects of art.

The exhibition opened last Thursday. No-one has complained about the nudity in the exhibit, according to the gallery's curator, Mr David Thomas.

"A change of plan" was not seen at the gallery today. A small sign said: "Tim Burns's materials are exhausted. The piece will resume when replacements are found."

02

T

IM BURNS IS a legendary figure in the history of Australian underground art. He rose to notoriety in the early 1970s with a

series of (literally) explosive art actions, before decamping to New York, where he remained on and off until the mid '90s. He now resides on a large property near the town of York, in Western Australia. Rather than identifying as a painter, filmmaker, karaoke videographer, installation artist, theatre director or performer (although he has done all these and more), Burns calls himself 'a context artist'. What unites the hugely varied set of projects Burns has worked on over the last forty years is a constant desire to set up situations which critically reflect on our hypermediated, industrialised western society. His interventions are usually created live, in the public sphere, rather than being quietly crafted in the privacy of a studio setting. More often than not, they result in some sort of dramatic surprise or shift in the participants' attention. The arrest of Barry Prothero, one of the 'objects of art' in *A Change of Plans* (1973) is typical of the controversy that so often surrounds his work.

A Change of Plans, presented at the Art Gallery of NSW in the exhibition 'Recent Australian Art', was in part, Burns' attack on the passive relationship between viewer and artwork, which usually prevails in an art gallery context. Like countless works of art through history, *A Change of Plans* involved nudes—but his nudes were presented on a television monitor, transmitted via real-time closed-circuit television. Burns had constructed a hidden back room in the gallery, and this space was inhabited by his unclothed colleagues Ursula Maierl and Barry Prothero, who interacted with curious gallery visitors via the TV intercom system, for the duration of the show.

As Burns explains:

"CCTV was a relatively new technology at the time, and many

DANGER

MINE FIELD ENTER AT OWN RISK

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The minefield established by Tim Burns at the 1973 Mildura Triennial was thought to be too dangerous for a public place and was deloused by a front end loader before the exhibition opened.

[Herald, Melbourne, 10/4/73. THE SCULPTOR AND THE BOMB]

Sculptor Tim Burns' exhibit in a Mildura sculpture exhibition really went off with a bang. . . .

In fact, that's what his exhibit of 400 square yards of sand was - a real minefield.

Burns, 25, who wears a T-shirt branded Time Bomb, used granulated gunpowder in plastic bags as the explosives in the exhibit.

Nursing burns to right arm and right leg, Burns said today that two of the charges were set off when he lost balance and his hand pressed down on one of the 20 charges he had set in the sand.

'It was a curiosity thing that would have pushed people to the point of finding out if there really was a mine field there,' he said.

FROM KEN SCARLETTS AUSTRALIAN SCULPTOR

bomb hits Mildura

A year or so ago, when Mr McCullough spent money on two works by established artists, Colin Lanceley and Gary Sheard, the then Mayor cried angrily: "Honest dollars for rubbish!" And that was back in the days when an art work was still an object.

What will the traditionalists make of this year's works?

For example:

"Minefield" by Tim Burns (ex-CMF), in which detonators set off small charges of gunpowder when spectators walk across a cleared space" (Tension caused by the opposing urges of fear and curiosity provides the frisson.)

"Ecology Well" by Red Grounds, where the art-lover must climb down into a dark and unsafe tunnel to view a pool of Murray River water 20 feet or so below the ground.

"EggOne" by Ti Park, hundreds of hard-boiled eggs laid out on an ant-bed, with millions of frustrated ants providing the living component. ("The ants can't get at the eggs but the crows and the geese can.")



04

visitors found it difficult to believe that Ursula and Barry were actually there, behind the white wall. They thought, perhaps, that the nudes were at the [ABC TV studios] or something. On the first Sunday afternoon of the show a group of people were debating the location of the naked couple on the television... so to show the proximity of the unseen space of 'the room' the male performer [Barry Prothero] stepped out into the gallery, into the audience's reality and went to the toilet... still naked. Some of the guards were incensed by this public display of indecency that they considered outside the boundaries of the work, and they tried to shut it down by removing and ultimately smashing the TV, thereby separating the couple from their audience... they also called the police.

Burns did not plan or script this action in advance. However, Prothero's impromptu breaking of the frame represents a consummation of the work's underlying Brechtian rationale: a two dimensional image which not only speaks back, but emerges from behind the safety of the screen, walks among us, and even pisses!

In Burns' best-known work, created in 1973, towards the end of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, the artist installed a field of homemade explosives at the Mildura Sculpturscape. The piece, *Minefield*, has become notorious in the history of Australian art, due to the fact that it was shut down before it even opened to the public. As Burns says:

"The 'minefield' was surrounded with signs saying 'DANGER MINEFIELD ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK'. Unfortunately, as I was laying the final charge, one of my assistants leant on the pressure mat I was installing and the explosion burnt the back of my leg, and I received hospital treatment the night before the opening. This alerted the authorities to the work's serious nature and the

curators of the exhibition threw rocks onto the minefield until they hit one of the trigger devices, and the charge detonated with a cloud of smoke. The council and the curators then decided to bring in a tractor and bulldoze the minefield early on the opening day."

According to Burns, it is not that he deliberately seeks trouble. Equally, he does not shy away from failure—and when (somehow, inevitably) trouble and failure find him, Burns seizes upon them, as he says, "to produce something out of a negative event. Instead of brushing it under the carpet, I celebrate my misfortunes and something comes of them".

Dust-ups, such as those provoked by *A Change of Plans* and *Minefield* are often triggers which prise open the nature of power and social control for public scrutiny. He is an agitator of the old school. Teri Hoskin, curator at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation (AEAF) in Adelaide describes Burns as 'The Great Fool'—he who is able to tell truths which the rest of us are too polite or embarrassed to broach.

Burns has always practiced unusual forms of activism, with motor vehicles and televisions his most common target. The work *A Pedestrian Series of Postcards* (1975-6) again used Mildura as its site and context. Having decided that a particular intersection in the town was in dire need of a pedestrian crosswalk, Burns photographed it, then travelled to New York where he produced a series of colour-photocopied postcards. These were mailed to random addresses in the town. Mail-art may have been common in New York at the time, but the arrival of *A Pedestrian Series of Postcards* in Mildura caused quite a stir, inciting much debate in the letters section of the local newspaper, the *Sunraysia Daily*, and encouraging at least one candidate to run for local council on the platform of pedestrian rights. The postcards and ensuing news



05

080

articles were later collected together in a self-published book. Burns also made a feature-length super-8 film condemning car culture, entitled *Why Cars – CARnage!* (1977) in New York, and a work of expanded theatre entitled *Autogeddon* (1999) in Perth.

His recent work is no less an irritant in the eye of the polite art world. At the 2009 Sculpture by the Sea in Cottesloe and Bondi, Burns exhibited a series of road-killed kangaroos. Cast in plaster and fibreglass from real (and rotting) dead 'roos found by the highway, Burns' rather unromantic work, *Why Cars Kill Retablo*, stands in stark contrast to the steel modernist formalism and seaside lyricism which is standard fare for Sculpture by the Sea. On Burns' deliberate instruction, *Why Cars Kill Retablo* was installed on the margins of the beach, up near the roadside, where it might appear unexpectedly in the peripheral vision of passing drivers.

His current projects demonstrate a commitment to a more mature—if no less whacky—method for integrating art with everyday life. On his property near York, Burns has been developing a large-scale experimental 'vermiculture' system: a worm-driven composting toilet device, using a network of old refrigerators as decomposition chambers. This installation looks like the utopian flipside of *Mad Max*. And perhaps this is perhaps no coincidence: Burns has always liked to situate himself off the grid—yet, as this complex work of land-art demonstrates, his practice is motivated not by the desire for cheap pot-shots at the mainstream, but rather by deep, survivalist ecological ethics.

Stories proliferate Tim Burns' oeuvre. With a largely invisible back catalogue (encompassing explosions, experimental theatre performances, site-specific installations and 'auto-destructive' work) storytelling is perhaps the best way to keep it all alive. Burns is a walking, talking archive of his own adventures. Because

of the inflammatory nature of his actions (in which the police or fire brigade are often unwitting participants) many of his pieces are documented in newspaper clippings and court transcripts. Burns seizes upon this testimony, photocopying and annotating it to create a new set of works that embody and extend his unruly narrative. A suite of these documents was exhibited at the AEAF in Adelaide in 2009, Urban Dingo Gallery in Fremantle in 2008, and at Uplands Gallery in Melbourne in 2007. Sometime soon—I have no doubt—these documents will form the basis of a comprehensive book about the artist—providing younger generations with access to this important, but largely unknown body of work. ■

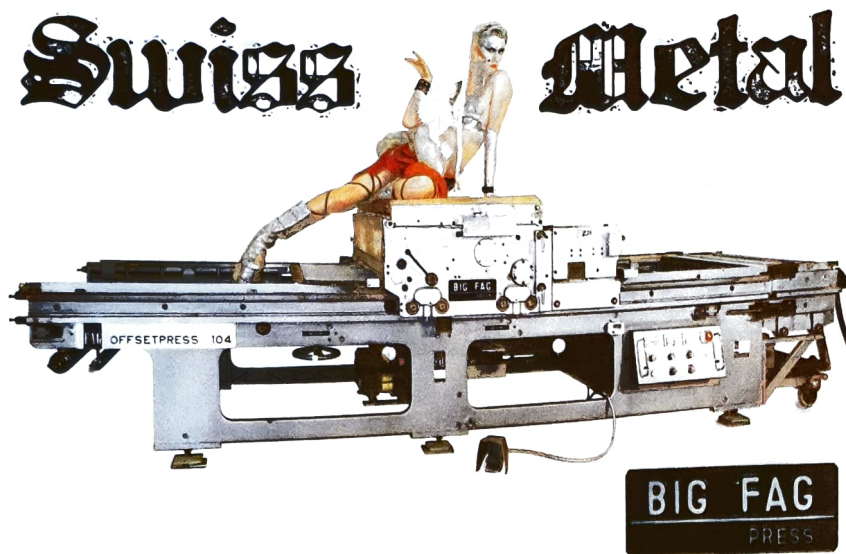
- 01 Tim Burns, 2006, silver gelatin print, 30.5 x 40.6cm (detail). Photo: [illegible] red-mond
- 02 Bridgeman
- 02 **More Shows of Lively Art**, 1973, West Australian newspaper, page 1
- 03 **Mildura Sign**, 2008, offset print on vinyl, re-print edition [art] [illegible] final silk
- screen by Earthworks, 40 x 60cm
- 04 **CARnage 2010**, 2010, performance with TV, car, explosives, [illegible] and amp
- Divided by Domenico de Clario. Courtes AEAF
- 05 **Tim Burns**, talk at Against the Grain / Tim Burns / Survey, [illegible] on, Tenn
- Hoskin
- 06 **Quarry**, 2011, works in process
- 07 **Why Cars? CARnage Roadkill Retablo**, 2009, fibreglass, urethane, [illegible] [illegible] paint, [illegible] [illegible]
- dimensions variable (life size). Installation view: Sculpture [illegible]
- Courtesy the artist



06



07



BIG FAG

Story Glenn Barkley

BIG FAG PURCHASED a press in 2004 that displaced a lot of the printing processes that came before it. As a once proud symbol of technological advancement, it was lord over all it surveyed. It has now come back in to the fold, reborn into an artisanal usage more akin to letter or relief press, rallying with its once conquered allies against the digital future.

"In 2004, one unfortunate printer in Sydenham [an inner-Sydney suburb] went bust. The liquidation auction was very sad. Nobody wanted his equipment despite the large number of print professionals in the room. We attended the auction and placed the winning (and only) bid on the big beautiful FAG 104 Offset Proof Press. Our bid was fifty dollars. The gavel came down, and to the astonishment of all in the room, the Big Fag was ours."

Any discussion about the work of Big Fag needs to take into consideration the point at which we find ourselves in regards to the printed image. Rapid technological change—especially in the production of printed matter—is irrevocably changing the nature of the printed image. The hard copy, the electronic copy, the soft copy, the printed image, the artist, the printer, and the master matrix are all being redefined in our contemporary, digital age.

It's within this state of flux between printmaking, radicalism and conceptualism that Big Fag operates. The principals of the press are only sometimes ahead of their 'clients' in terms of their ability to manage the printing process. At other times they may be behind, usurping the idea of 'master printmaker' and instead creating a truly collaborative space within which to work.

The Big Fag print workshop run by Mickie Quick, Lucas Ihlein, Diego Bonetto and Pat Armstrong centered around the large FAG 104 Offset Proof Press. Situated in Woolloomooloo Depot, an art studio managed by First Draft Gallery, Sydney, the Big

Fag's reputation is growing. Last year it was part of Art Basel in Switzerland. It is also a surrogate parent of other artist run collectives; The Rizzeria and Blood and Thunder Press.

"The Big Fag press is a not-for-profit cooperative. You are not a client. You are a participant. We value personal input and creativity over remuneration"

The Big Fag 'participatory model' has its parallel in the personally content driven nature of the internet. Instead of seeking solace within the print studio, the act of printmaking and the hard analogue nature of printing itself, the Big Fag revels in the polymorphous nature of the digital world. Apart from being the very big, very real and very heavy (4 tonnes!) press, the Big Fag as a collective is also a blog, a flicker account and generates prints through digital files criss-crossing the city, the country and the globe.

Big Fag laughs in the face of the never ending anxiety of printing's demise. Its mix of political agitation, play and poetry thumbs its nose at the paranoia of a print-less tomorrow and it's 'who cares' attitude reveals the reason why printmaking, and the printed world, is here to stay. ■

www.bigfagpress.org

- 01 Mickie Quick (design), centrefold from Big Fag Press poster/brochure featuring "Faggot Rooster", 2008, offset lithographic print
 02 Mickie Quick (design), *Rising Sun*, 2008, front page from Big Fag Press poster/brochure, offset lithographic print
 Courtesy Big Fag Press, Sydney

01

02