

'We will become even more inaccessible, even more clandestine...The more our theses become famous, the more we ourselves will become obscure' Guy Debord¹

This CD-ROM is an assemblage of documents, images, interviews, random dates, references and links, providing access to sources which otherwise remain locked in memories and hidden archives, in boxes under people's beds or in their garages where cockroaches eat the paper and breed, or rising damp and mould fades and yellows the print. The material contained here is a collection of traces, rather than a history - so let's call it a prehistory.

In *'Memory Trade: A Prehistory of Cyberculture'*.(1997) Darren Tofts argues:

'prehistories work at the margins of perception, delineating the barely legible traces of cultural memory that inhabit the strong inscriptions of everyday life. Histories record: Prehistories invent'.

These traces touch the surface of Sydney cultural life from the 1950s to the 1980s and the emergence of a zone we now call the 'artworld'. Although the focus is Sydney, the participants move between cities and states in a constant process of internal migration, much like the movements of artists and writers between countries in Europe in the inter-war period. Beyond capital cities and the emphasis on contemporary Western art, (which is to say the regional concerns of the claim to internationalism), another whole world has come into existence in the last thirty years (Western desert painting, contemporary Asian art) and this world overshadows the remnants of an earlier twentieth century avant-gardism whose death is regularly observed (though periodic resurrections are regularly announced).

The period observed here is characterised by an overlap of strong individuals and developing institutions in which individuals frequently become submerged (having themselves argued for the existence of the institutions and worked tirelessly to establish them). In general this is a period in which the tradition of the manifesto gives way to the culture of the policy document. Although it has been customary to lament this shift and to bemoan the excessive institutionalisation which has occurred, this outcome was demanded from the start by artists and their organisations, when for the first time relatively high levels of public funding became available after 1972. Nowhere is this phenomenon made more clear than in the formation of the Artworkers Union (NSW) and in the documents included in this selection, the evolution of this transformation can be seen.

Alongside this institutionalisation and professionalisation, its opposite has also existed in the scorched earth rhetoric of an anti-art movement which has continuities with earlier movements such as Situationism, Lettrism, Fluxus. In this approach, characterised most strongly by the manifestoes of Ian Milliss in the 1970s, an attack is mounted on the distinction between the artist and the non-artist:

'Art is one of the tools of oppression in an oppressive society. Its function is to undermine the natural competency we all have in running our own lives. Creativity in our everyday lives is rendered meaningless and therefore impossible, because only 'artists' are 'creative' and artists don't live, they only make works of art. The rest of us are 'negative individuals who can't achieve things.'

'It is time the myth of the sanctity of the artist was demolished. There are only two qualifications for being an artist. The first is stupidity. One can be born stupid, or one can achieve stupidity, by lobotomy, by drugs, by alcohol or by liberal doses of money. I offer no comment as to which Australian artists come into which category. The second qualification is opportunism. Opportunists disguised as revolutionaries are far more effective defenders of bourgeois society than the bourgeoisie themselves because they destroy the radical opposition from within.'

The impossible aesthetic of the end of all art became entirely marginalised by the end of the 1980s, lost in art as therapy, community art projects as social/managerial strategies, or public artworks colluding with the privatisation of public space, but it left memories of impossible works of originality and force: for example, the Disclosures and Erotic Observations of Tim & Vivien Johnson, the fire sculptures of Joan Grounds, the minefields of Tim Burns.

This collection evokes the spirit of these inspired moments and those participants who became obscure rather than those who became professionalised and famous.

¹ in final communication of the Situationist International (dissolved 1972) - cited in Andrew Hussey: Review of *The Situationist City* by Simon Sadler (**London Review of Books**, Vol 21, No 17, 2 Sept, 1999, p31)

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(University of Western Sydney 2000)