

THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CENTRAL STREET GALLERY

PAUL McGILLICK

There has been a gallery space at No. 1 Central Street in the heart of down-town Sydney since 1966. At one time, in 1975/76, the Institute of Contemporary Art was utilising all three floors of the building. At present, only the ground floor is being used.

Central Street Gallery operated for five years until it closed in 1971 as a result of one of its then directors, Chandler Coventry, wanting to establish his own gallery elsewhere. The closure, however, was only temporary and in subsequent years the gallery has taken on the character of a Phoenix rising from the ashes.

The regular changes in gallery policy have mirrored the increasing fragmentation of the visual arts which commenced in the early 70's. These changes in policy which is really only another way of saying changes in the way the space has been utilised were always conscious responses by those currently associated with the gallery to the changing needs and emphases of the "art world". More often, it would be more accurate to speak of initiatives rather than responses for I think it is true to say that Central Street (as it is invariably known) has consistently led the way in signalling new directions in art in Australia.

This flexibility makes Central Street and its history a kind of barometer of changes in the visual arts in Australia since early 1966. Unlike any other non-institutional gallery in Australia, Central Street has not only exhibited current work, but maintained a didactic activity to support these exhibitions. By this I mean that new work was always, where possible, accompanied by some explication of its premises and sources. This was done by exhibitions, such as the early *Matisse papier decoupees* (1966), Josef Albers (both *Homage to the Square* and *The Interaction of Colour*), and a number of other imported exhibitions from Britain and the U.S. It was done also by catalogues, publications and seminars. No other gallery in Australia has documented its own history as comprehensively as Central Street - to be completed by a forthcoming history of the gallery.

The mercurial character of the gallery, however, has also ensured that Central Street has frequently been the focus of distortions and halftruths sometimes propagated by people and institutions who perceive Central Street as being in some way a rival to their own ambitions, sometimes propagated by those individuals who have attempted to exploit the gallery for their own purposes and failed, sometimes propagated by the ill-informed and sometimes propagated by those with an ideological barrow to push (viz. Central was "reactionary" or "derivative" or "elitist").

This is not the place to launch into a lengthy defence of Central Street against its detractors. However, one recent example warrants a retort and will serve to cast some light on what I have just said.

Gary Catalano recently published a book entitled *The Years of Hope* (O.U.P., 1981) which purports to be a study of Australian art and criticism during the period 1959 to 1968. Either as a result of unworthy motives or as the result of poor scholarship, Mr. Catalano has, in effect, published a "revised" version of Australian art in that period - "revised" because it omits a large number of artists who were important (and many of

whom remain important) and because it seems to go out of its way to distort the truth about some other artists and galleries.

Mr. Catalano, of course, worked for Watters Gallery for some time and, sure enough, it is Watters which gets the five star rating for everything from originality to integrity. At the same time, he rakes over the ashes of what he imagines to have been a rivalry between Central Street and Watters. No such rivalry existed then or since.

Catalano seems particularly intent on an attempt to discredit Central Street. He goes to extraordinary lengths. For example, Dick Watkins is named as one of Australia's best painters. But only Watkins' first show at Watters is mentioned. In fact, Watkins showed mainly at Central Street and established his reputation there. Similarly, Alan Oldfield's first exhibition at Watters is noted, but with no mention of the several shows at Central Street which subsequently established Oldfield.

Mr. Catalano asserts that Central Street only got the reputation it did because it was run by advertising people who knew how to market a product. This highly inaccurate assertion was (by default) supported by no less a person than Bernard Smith when he reviewed the book (in *Island, No.8, Nov. 1981*). The facts are these: John White and Harald Noritis (both painters and both commercial artists) ran their business out of the building. When they acquired new premises, they retained the lease on Central Street and made it available for use as a gallery.

The main moving force behind the gallery's establishment was Tony McGillick who had just returned from England as part of a wave of expatriates who returned in 1965/66. The gallery was intended to show the work of these expatriates and argue for the principles which informed their art. McGillick had spent most of his five years abroad working fulltime as a painter. He returned to take up a job with an advertising agency. Like many artists in Australia (Syd Ball, Brett Whiteley and Michael Johnson for example), McGillick's initial art training came by way of an "apprenticeship" with an advertising agency. In the fifties, this was often the only way for a young person of limited means to get through art school.

The first manager of Central Street was Royston Harpur, a painter and a former gallery director of the ICA in London. He had no connection with advertising. None of the other artists who exhibited in those establishment years had anything to do with advertising. Moreover, it should be pointed out that Central Street, in its initial years, was run as a cooperative by all the artists involved. Artists who showed during this time were Michael Johnson, Dick Watkins, Rollin Schlicht, Wendy Paramor, Joe Szabo, Gunter Christmann and Alan Oldfield.

If, as Mr. Catalano asserts, Central Street was so successful, why did it consistently lose money? Central Street has always been subsidised by private money: most of that money (to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars over a fifteen year period) has come from the gallery's principal benefactors, John White and Harald Noritis; for a short period it was Chandler Coventry who put a lot of money into the venture. Today Central Street is still supported by White and Noritis. It has never enjoyed either the sympathy or the financial support of the Visual Arts Board. Perhaps it was the futility of pretending to be commercial with an art which was largely uncommercial that prompted a change in policy after the brief period of closure in the early 70's. In fact, policy had been changing even before this as evidenced by "Known Systems, Anonymous Gestures" (1970) probably the first conceptual/systems show in Australia - and the CAS-sponsored, "The Situation Now", which was accompanied by an extensive catalogue edited by Terry Smith. Anyway, since 1972, Central Street has always been non-commercial. This is not to say that it hasn't acted as agent for an artist

(usually when a sale has resulted from a piece being exhibited in the gallery), only that it has not looked to sell art, nor has it promoted art because of its potential commercial viability.

From 1974 to March 1978, Central Street (under the new name, Institute of Contemporary Art) operated fulltime with myself as executive director. Its programme included exhibitions and installations, plays, concerts, dance programmes, poetry readings, seminars and workshops. The ICA published a quarterly magazine and prepared a number of documentation packages of work originally presented in the gallery.

From overseas, the exhibitions included the Merce Cunningham show (prints by Johns, Rauschenberg, Nauman, Cage and others; films, videos, posters and memorabilia), John Danvers, John Baldessari, the St Martins Sculpture Photographic Survey and artists from British Columbia in Canada. The first Women's Art Movement shows were held at the ICA, together with solo shows by Elizabeth Gower, Ken Unsworth, Peter Kennedy and a group show by past residents of the Power Studio in Paris. John Cage attended a concert in his honour and seminars were led by Lucy Lippard and Clement Greenberg. Jacqui Carroll and Nanette Hassell were among the many dancers who performed at the gallery, while concerts featured Bill Fontana, Warren Burt, David Ahern, Jon Rose and Colin Offord.

Today the ICA functions on a part-time basis, without staff and with myself as coordinator of exhibitions. In 1981 Richard Dunn organised a series of four exhibitions including an installation by himself, together with installations by John Lethbridge, Rose Anne McCreevy and Kevin Sheehan. Presentations are restricted to static exhibitions/installations as the combination of new fire regulations and problems of supervision make performance difficult to accommodate. Most of the presentations result from approaches to the gallery by individual artists wanting to use the space. These presentations are supervised by the artist at times which vary from show to show. No rent is charged unless work is sold as a result of exhibiting in the space. In this event, a small rental is negotiated as a contribution to the gallery's maintenance costs. Sales, however, are rare, as most of the work exhibited is of a non-saleable nature.

What, then, is the gallery's policy?

This is hard to pin down, as a primary objective is to remain flexible. At the moment, the gallery is seen as a kind of anti-gallery, operating in a manner almost entirely opposed to the conventional gallery. The gallery does not advertise, except by direct mailing to selected people. The gallery is noncommercial. It does not run a stable of artists (although there are a small number of artists who appear to prefer to show in this space). It is principally interested in showing work which, either because of its non-commercial or innovative character, is not likely to be presented elsewhere. To some extent the gallery continues a policy (important in the 1974-78 period) of being a launch pad for new artists although the main emphasis is now on good work, rather than the trendy or new work for its own sake.

In particular, the gallery seems to be veering towards becoming a highly "private" space - an operation with low visibility. In this way it runs counter to modish preoccupations with "marketing". It is difficult to find out what is on at Central Street. It is difficult to get into: one has to stoop through a small doorway and ascend a steep flight of stairs, borrow a key to the gallery from an obliging secretary upstairs and then let oneself in and out of the gallery space. More and more, it is becoming necessary to make special arrangements with the artist to get to see his work.

The reason for this growing anti-social attitude is, I think, twofold. Firstly, to put it rhetorically, why should art be of easy access? Central Street has always been a serious gallery (though rarely earnest). At Central Street the art has always come first - before the ambitions of individuals and before the vulgarity of socialising. On the occasions when it has started to take on the character of a drinking trough, a boudoir or a drop-in centre, the doors have been closed and the operation re-assessed.

If art is that important, then make the effort to ring up, make an appointment and venture into one of the nastier parts of Sydney to see it. Do so in privacy, and do so as kind of communion. Good art is difficult. Central Street goes against the current philosophy which informs the activities of so many galleries that art must be easy. Good art is tough. There is precious little of it around in Sydney at the moment and Central Street is prepared to keep the doors closed until good work becomes available.

The second reason for going underground is a feeling that the visual arts have been over-exposed. More than ever art has become a commodity. The dialectic of the 60's and 70's has been betrayed by artists who once denounced the prostitution of others but who now peddle their own brands of merchandise. The sins of each generation are perpetuated by the next. Central Street rejects the notion of art as commodity - or, at the very least, the artist should be honest with himself. After all no one's arguing with the artist's right to eat and have a roof over his head. As Brecht remarked: "*Erst kommt das Fressen, -dann kommt die Moral.*" (1) We should, however, reject art as subject for the social column, art as the vehicle only of ambition and reject the notion of artist-as-serf. Most of all: let's ditch the notion of artist as Ego.

The current policy at Central Street could almost be termed a closed-door policy - both literally and figuratively. This policy, like all the previous policies, stems from a simple belief: that making art is a worthwhile activity and that any art made with integrity is entitled to be appreciated and evaluated in the most favourable circumstances.

By this I don't mean that art should be accepted uncritically. On the contrary, what we most lack in this country is a mature critical attitude - one which goes beyond the playground level of taking all criticism to be a form of vindictiveness. Central Street believes that, at the moment, the best thing the visual arts can do is to retreat behind closed doors for a while and re-assess. Quality does matter. Standards do matter. If they didn't, we would all be faced with the existentialist's final option.

Central Street has closed its doors. But it is still showing art. And closed doors do not mean a closed shop. Artists are invited to contact the gallery with proposals for using the space. A written proposal is preferred. It should be remembered that the ICA has very limited funds, most of which are reserved for maintaining the space. Artists are, therefore, expected to fund their own exhibitions. Enquiries should be directed to Paul McGillick (Executive Director) Institute of Contemporary Art, 1 Central Street, Sydney 2000. NSW.

Footnote 1. First comes food, then morality.

Source: Art Network, No 6, Winter 1982 p48-9