

## PATRICK McCAUGHEY'S DEFENSE OF THE POWER INSTITUTE.

Noel Hutchison.(CAS Broadsheet April 72)

It is an extremely unusual 'defense' that concludes with such a question as "After 10 years and upwards of \$750 000 expenditure, might we not reasonably expect something else than to cough up more dough" - i.e. for the proposed Power Foundation.

Of course, yes, we might "reasonably expect something else". We might expect, for example a Power Institute that is an innovatory centre – promoting and investigating the very latest forms of art. We might expect a place where opportunities to surmount public apathy to modern forms of art are not missed. We might expect a place with a deep commitment to involving the public in advanced forms of art rather than half-hearted gestures such as the occasional public lecture, yearly exhibition, and the training of ill-equipped art-historians.

The efficacy of teaching art history is sufficiently established for it to be taught at any university, but the teaching of art history as an unconnected discipline is indefensible. Like most things taught at a university, there are wider implications in what is taught and the way it is taught.

Attitudes to knowledge are as important as the knowledge itself. An autocratic structure is virtually self-defeating in a university – that is unless we believe in the concept of a university as a sausage machine for producing dolts.

In the literal sense, the will of John Power is being obeyed to the letter. We are being given lectures on some of the "latest ideas and theories". We are having purchased some of the "most recent contemporary art in the world". Yet the spirit of the will is not being taken into account at all. What about all the various forms of important contemporary art that cannot be purchased and may only be supported by grant subsidy or co-operation. It must appear absurd and be very depressing for many of our better young artists when they read of the continual stress that the Power Institute places on the so-called 'permanent' art-object. That not one iota of interest is shown in the participatory art event or ephemeral art activity is for an Institute of Contemporary Art, a negligence of some importance.

To give an example of the opportunities that are available and that are missed. During March the two members of the Event-structure Research Group, from Holland, were in Australia. In Melbourne, during the Moomba Festival, they not only put on a 'Waterwalk' on the Yarra, but they also set up a 'Rainbow' at the National Gallery of Victoria. To do their various things, they used the comparatively cheap materials such as polythene or P.V.C. tube. They even came to Sydney and were organised by lecturers of the Faculty of Architecture into putting on an afternoon with a 'Tube' at the interior swimming pool at the University of Sydney. This was paid for by the architecture students themselves. The Power Institute showed either ignorance of their being here, or a complete lack of interest. It does not matter which. Both demonstrate incapacity. One can only point out what a hit could have been made by a 'Tube over Sydney Harbour'. Certainly the media would have lapped it up. Professor

Smith would have found a much greater public interest in his Power Foundation which he was inaugurating at the time if he could have demonstrated the Power Institute's adventurousness by something as mind catching.

Indeed, it is one of the current absurdities that the proposed Foundation is being established 'to collect Australian art' - something we do not really need as the Art Gallery of N.S.W. does that - instead of the new resources being used to further the various types of art projects that could be put on in this country by internationally-known artists. The Christo affair should have been only the beginning of such forms of activity encouraged by the Institute. It showed how contemporary art may really capture the public's imagination. One hopes that the proposal for the goals of the Foundation is not just another pathetic attempt to buy support and stifle criticism by the use of patronage.

What we do have - and let us be frank about it - is a Power Institute that lacks initiative and imagination. Much of the trouble is that the Institute has more functions to fulfil than any ordinary university department, but this cannot be an excuse for inadequacy. The Institute is now caught up in the typically conservative British university syndrome of elitism combined with a ghetto mentality. This is just about as anti-intellectual as the worst excesses found in our Australian suburbs.. One reaches the conclusion that the Institute is a kernel with a very thin layer of achievement spread around on the inside.

In one sense 'Mac the Knife's' little article is quite right. It is a matter of unfulfilled 'expectations'. However, it is not because of the lack of finance that expectations have not been fulfilled, but rather because of the narrow vision of those in authority. There is more than one way to husband one's resources.