

## **7. Terry Smith: The C.A.S. and the Situation Now**

### **The C.A.S. and the Situation Now**

Some plain statements about my association with the C.A.S. this year, and about the exhibition "The Situation Now: Object and Post-Object Art."

When I came to Sydney in 1968 it was immediately apparent that the NSW C.A.S. while it boasted of a large (and largely inactive) membership, had outlived its original and only real function: to fight and win the battle for twentieth century art styles by a sufficiently large audience in this country. Partly through the efforts of the C.A.S. of NSW and Victoria "modernist" art had ceased to be an issue of contention by the early 1960s (to put it generously late). Throughout the 1960s the C.A.S. seemed to be a loose association of survivors from these old battles, confirming for themselves that their own art was contemporary. It was of interest to young artists only because it offered one of a burgeoning number of art prizes. Its single relevant function had come to be the display of work by unknown young artists at its annual shows and (for already known young artists) in its exhibition "Young Contemporaries".

But the vast quantity of art prize exhibitions, and the easy access to galleries like Watters, meant that by the end of the 1960s the C.A.S. was again one amongst many offering this service to young artists.

Of interest throughout the 1960s were the monthly raves in the Broadsheet of the long-time President, Mr. Elwyn Lynn - essays to which one responded with a respect or amusement proportionate to one's knowledge of art, but which at least had the virtue of touching on issues currently under discussion within the Sydney art world.

These essays and the odd exhibition of young artists hardly added up to a relevant art society, to say nothing of a contemporary art society. The lecture program reached an all-time low in 1970, as the typical reporting back after a trip overseas ceased to interest an audience with many other ways of gaining this information. And without the one-man-band dynamic offered by the personality of Mr Lynn, who had resigned as President, it seemed that the C.A.S. might best lay down and die.

It was with some diffidence, then, that I accepted an invitation to offer suggestions for exhibitions at the proposed C.A.S. Gallery. In consultation with Tony McGillick, the following program was proposed:-

Four opening exhibitions:

- 1) THE SITUATION NOW: Object and Post-Object Art.
- 2) INSTALLATION: A series without specified end wherein artists are invited to utilise the space to create an environment, doing in and to the space anything they choose; each three weeks in duration. - Artists to be invited: Alexander Danko, Bill Gregory, Robert Cole, Ian Milliss, Ti Parks, Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy, and others as appropriate. These to alternate with straight shows.
- 3) Big Paintings by David Aspden, 2 x 30 ft. long; 2 x 10 ft. square.
- 4) Tim Johnson's Trip,

OTHERS (in whatever convenient order):

- 5) Computer art resulting from experiments at Sydney University,
- 6) The structure of color in art.
- 7) Critical retrospective of the work of John Olsen,
- 8) Restaging of the exhibition "Direction 1".
- 9) Reassessment: David Davies and Walter Withers,
- 10) Four Holden Cars,
- 11) Eventstructure Research Group (from London/'Eindhoven).
- 12) A.P.G. - La Mama.
- 13) Computer Hardware,
- 14) Anthology of the Moratorium and Protest Movement in Australia.
- 15) Sound-Tape- Loop exhibition.
- 16) Australian conceptual artists in New York.
- 17) Installations from plans provided by e.g. LeWitt, Andre, Morris.

These proposals were offered (conditional on the availability of materials and discussion with the artists involved) with the assurance that Tony and I would compile and direct these exhibitions with the help, but not subject to the direction of, an exhibitions committee of the C.A.S.

It was agreed that the Gallery should aspire towards the example of the London I.C.A., that it would be run according to the three principles of devotion to art education, to controversy about contemporary art and to an explicitly non-commercial involvement in art. A sum of \$6,000 originally gathered as a "building fund" but at the time on loan to a C.A.S. member as part of a "real estate investment", was to be recalled and spent throughout the first year of the operation of the gallery, in the belief that an exciting exhibition program would attract sufficient monies from entry charges and catalogue sales for the gallery to pay its own way by the end of the first year. The program proposed above was accepted in principle by the committee, the first four exhibitions accepted as proposed, with the understanding that the usual annual C.A.S. shows would be fitted into the program.

Accordingly, I went ahead with initial work on each of the exhibitions, and detailed work on the first exhibition, visiting artists in Sydney and Melbourne to gather works for the exhibition and interviews for the catalogue (the format and size of which had also been agreed to by the committee), arranging and supervising its printing, and so on. All this was done throughout June and early July. At the same time I discussed with Alexander Danko his proposals for the second exhibition, an environment installation costing \$100. Over this matter, I received my first indication of the parsimony of the C.A.S. committee - they withdrew their original offer of paying Danko's fare from Adelaide, then questioned the sum of \$100. Danko then offered me a modified proposal costing \$45. When Mr. Guy Warren, then President, suggested that the C.A.S. could perhaps lend Danko this money, I suggested to Danko that he withdraw his project, which he did, leaving open the option of applying for an Arts Council grant to do an environment at a later date. As a consequence, I refused to organise an alternative second exhibition, and did not act further on the other proposed exhibitions.

At the 1971 annual general meeting, the retiring president introduced as a fait accompli his three trustees of the C.A.S. finances, in particular the \$6,000 "building fund", which was declared untouchable, to be used in the future to buy (!) a building, with the corollary that the gallery should run itself on its day-to-day income.

It seemed to me that this move spelt the end of the C.A.S. gallery as a viable institution. No gallery in Australia at the moment is running itself from its own income, and a non-commercial gallery has not the faintest hope of doing so, if it doesn't begin at its highest capacity - important exhibitions cost money, but only a program of important exhibitions can attract money (from people who come, from the government, and from industry). The C.A.S. gallery is now committed to the display of cheap, ephemeral exhibitions which require almost no outlay and little preparation. The Young Contemporaries and the "Wide Open" exhibitions have both been of this sort.

Worse still, the decision to run the gallery on a shoestring reveals the same poverty of adventurous spirit that has characterised the C.A.S. in recent years. It is an approach that places the mere continuance of the institution itself above the following through, even at risk, of the reasons why the institution exists. Through this kind of timidity, the C.A.S. confirms its irrelevance to contemporary art in this country.

At this point I resolved to retreat to my previous position of taking only a passing interest in the affairs of the society. Nothing the new committee has yet done promises the renaissance of the C.A.S. that looked, for a few moments in May-August, to be possible.

Throughout the 1960s the C.A.S. has been very much an "art scene" thing. Largely by default, and largely because of the personality of its president, the C.A.S. in Sydney was seen by succeeding groups of artists as an important base for power-plays within the scene. The pettiness and crudity of thinking that characterise any "scene" were clearly reflected in the manoeuvring for committee membership, selection at exhibitions and in some lectures. This tradition of jealousy, imagined conspiracies, ego-trips, interest in anything but the making of art, arose to a probably unprecedented degree around the exhibition "The Situation Now". Ian Milliss' letter (Broadsheet, Aug/Sept) reflects this to an obsessive degree.

It was part of my declared intention to arouse controversy about what is going on, and what is important in art now. And it seems that I succeeded in touching every raw nerve within the Sydney art world. But the more important part of my intention was to focus what I well knew to be the going controversies, the sore points, to bring some order to these disparate attitudes, personal crises, creative complexes, focus them around specific issues, as set out in my "Propositions" and as recurring in the discussions throughout the catalogue.

My basic motivation was my belief that Australian art is set to go through an avantgarde phase, necessary before unreservedly good art can be produced in this country, and that the best way I could serve this was to help clarify all the issues at stake in the current debate. My approach was cathartic - I laid out a shift across the scale from closed object through open-form to conceptual art, and obliged artists and

critics and spectators to identify themselves at some position within it. Out of the turmoil, nearly everybody did this, in a way no longer avoidable in the future.

I wanted to show that object and post-object art were not necessarily alternatives (although many artists feel them to be so), that the implication that post-object art was the historically inevitable replacement of object art was a crude simplification. It should be clear that my distinctions were vertical descriptions, a cross-section of the art situation now, with all the agents developing along through time together, growing out of each other, combining and recombining, not just replacing each other. Yet the either/or stupidity was the initial level of response of many artists and others who let their own personal doubts invade their usually intelligent responses to art's situation.

There is far less excuse for critics like Daniel Thomas, who deliberately trivialised the issues to the extent of finding this "lively infighting as interesting a spectacle as the exhibition itself" (Sunday Telegraph Aug. 1), and like Laurie Thomas, who attributes it all to his bete noir, myself as the critic who "usurps the artist's role" (Australian Sept.7). A serious, intelligent engagement with art, with the ideas around the making and response to art, is beyond both of them.

But these reactions disturb me less than the present plight of the C.A.S. Failure with the gallery will follow inevitably from a non-policy about exhibitions which tries to satisfy the present tastes of everybody (often artists who feel that their kind of art needs protection from the unspecific threat of any other kind of art - thus the current wailing about the C.A.S. being "obsessed with conceptualism"), which fails to comprehend its educative function, which shies from controversy and, above all, is so tight with the money it does have that even the few poor ideas which its present committee can conceive are capable of only the paltriest realisation.

#### Reply to Alan Oldfield:

The one published response to the "Situation Now" exhibition worthy of reply is Alan Oldfield's comments on three of my ten "Propositions" (Broadsheet, Aug/Sept).

His objections to my first proposition seem a quibbling set of counter-assertions. I was trying to pin down the feeling held by those painters who don't feel irrationally threatened by the existence (and predominance of critical attention directed to) other ways of making art. This feeling follows from overcoming the sense of threat (which Oldfield evidently has not done - vide his responses to criticism of his recent exhibition) to see that the pressure to innovate is now being carried across a broad front of art, not by painting almost entirely alone - as it has been for most of this century, as witness the fitful record of twentieth century sculpture. This sense of liberation, of so many marvellous things to do as a painter, goes hand-in-hand with a rejection of formalist thinking about the necessitous progress of artistic change which ends up in the late 1960s in a dead-end - a formalist cannot paint beyond Noland, Olitski, Stella, or sculpt beyond Caro, without seeming to go back to 1950s usages. Surely liberation follows from release from such contortions, where historicist pressures intervene in the creation of art. Thus proposition 1 links with propositions 3 and 4.

Painting has been chief amongst the arts since Leonardo successfully argued for its special status in the fifteenth century. The surprise which has attended my mentioning this reflects that it is a truism, something so taken for granted that it is easy to pretend that it is a belief that nobody ever held. Formalist theory treats painting as a self-contained, self-referring system, with a unique set of intrinsic conventions. It seems to me that in the 1960s this speciality reached a self-conscious highpoint beyond which it is impossible to go without confusion. The alternative for painters is to as it were take a step back out of this self-referring system and to regard painting in a much more relaxed way, as one of many techniques among others, with typical conventions that can be manipulated nearly as freely as those of even the most exploratory forms of new art.

There has been some local discussion of the term "abstraction", especially as used in my proposition 3, which begins: "The basic twentieth century program of ever-accelerating abstraction is still basic". The clearest common language use runs as follows: "figurative art" is that in which things in the world as they normally appear are represented: "abstract art" distorts, modifies, elaborates, reduces, varies, generalises the normal appearance of the thing in the world to an ever increasing degree; "non-figurative art" is that in which the work is composed out of the given elements of the medium, with no reference at any stage in the composing of the work to the appearance of things in the world. Mondrian's career is a clear example of an artist moving through each of these three. (These distinctions were introduced to me by Donald Brook).

There are four major streams in twentieth century art - those arising out of Cubism; out of painterly abstraction beginning with Fauvism and German Expressionism; out of geometric abstraction beginning with Die Stijl and Constructivism; and out of Dada-Surrealism. Each of these is a movement into abstraction to some degree and, although Cubism and Dada-Surrealism held back from non-figuration, they were important bases from Abstract Expressionist non-figuration. Expressionism and Die Stijl-Constructivism were already into non-figuration by the middle of the second decade of the century. The impetus through abstraction to non-figuration is the only element in twentieth century art more basic than the four streams mentioned above - it is the outstandingly obvious twentieth century thing about twentieth century art - it is broader and more diverse than many recognise - and it increases in dominance and variety throughout the century.

And anyone who knows anything about art history knows that each of these steps into abstract formal structures was made in an effort (in the early part of the century usually from a religious motivation) to achieve a more real, actual, concrete, true, coherent art. The reality within, deeper than, underlying the mere appearance of things in the world as normally seen. There was no paradox felt at the time, just as there is no paradox in seeing, say, Stella's art as literal (direct, inescapably there, frontal, reduced to essentials) and non-figurative, an extension of abstraction.

Post-object artists who state their preference for recent figurative art over recent non-figurative art are either muddled in their thinking or are, rather cheaply, highlighting their distaste for formalism. Their proper position is to reject both, but to recognise

that they, themselves emerge out of an abstraction so extreme that it has distended the very systems (painting, sculpture) which carried it.

Oldfield's remarks about my proposition 5 show an alarming political naivete. It astounds me that he fails to see that artists withdrew from the 1970 Venice Biennale etc., because they recognised that America's "cultural imperialism" in, say, Venice is analogous to its blatant military imperialism in Vietnam, and that the real connection between the two is that America as a "neo-capitalist" corporate state must of its nature necessarily become involved in Vietnam, Chauvinistic art exportation is just another face of America's rape of Asia. The art world, as he agrees (probably without understanding), is a specific case of the fundamental irrationality of this economic system - its present chaos reflects in microcosm the crisis inevitable in the system as a whole.

Artists who merely present art objects, and turn disdainfully away from the way these objects (or whatever) are used within this system, are copping out - keeping their social consciousness to themselves, or saving it for special sanctioned occasions, not letting it "infect" their actual art. The "art for art's sake" notion has been significant in the twentieth century, but within the present crisis context, it functions in day to day practice as irrelevant self-indulgence of a morally suspect nature ("I'm alright Jack, let me get on with my job").

I don't deny that art which is relevant to revolutionary social change and is good as art is rare in the history of art, and that the emergence of a genuinely revolutionary art out of the present previous, self-contained art system is problematic. But this does not make it impossible, nor remove the obligation of artists as human beings alive on this fucked-up earth in 1971 to aim for such an art.