

Power of the Traditional Fool

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MILDURA TRIENNIAL (Mildura)

Mildura is a small town in the corner of Victoria, close to the New South Wales and South Australia borders, notable for its irrigation-farmed fresh and dried fruits, wine and sculpture.

The artistic reputation is recent, but solid. Since 1961 there has been, each third year, an exhibition of the best three-dimensional art in Australia; and each of the four triennials has made its once-dramatic predecessor seem timid and oldfashioned. No doubt 1976 will eclipse the present exhibition; and it might be amusing to collect expert predictions now, to lock in a short time capsule, if any experts can be found imprudent enough to stack bombs under their own seats.

The most striking thing about the 1973 Triennial, held on twenty acres of former rubbish tip, is the victory it represents for what people are already starting to call "the new art". The "old art" of sculpture was an art of more or less portable objects that could be seen at once, understood without research, bought, carried away by enthusiastic collectors and stored for both varieties of appreciation.

There are some things like that in this exhibition, mostly quite out of scale with the huge and rugged site, and somehow conceptually marooned in limbo, like cosmetic samples washed up on a desert island. But the new art is dominant, both for its surprisingly superior grasp of the terrain and for the compelling power it exercises on the imagination.

There are about 130 exhibits, and one couldn't describe a tenth part of them adequately. Nor is it easy to pick on a typical work since examples of the new art are not tokens of a type but rather members of a club. And this fact itself generates one of the problems I should like to mention.

To clarify, at least partially, I ought to say that I have in mind such things as Ti Park's *Eggone* in which several dozen eggs were strewn on an anthill; David Morrissey's exhibition of himself as an art work living in a dilapidated shed; Michael Nicholson's ritual game (there is a competitive version) played by teams with wire and net and meteorological balloons; Imants Tiller's peripheral tents with linking strings that traverse the entire site; Tim Burns's real (and officially defused) minefield.

There are plenty of others, more different than they are alike - and this is the first point to be made. The new art is not primarily the manifestation of a positive doctrine, not even one as tenuous as that of the first art nouveau eighty years ago. It is rather a range of objects, activities and ideas formed in generable by negating or inverting one or more features of the traditionally established paradigm of art.

A work of sculpture used to be, most typically physical (not mental); compact (not extended); essentially visual (not communicable in code or in translation) artificial (not

easily mistaken for a natural thing or occurrence or an ordinary unexalted artefact); hermetic (not related openly to moral and political or any other extra-aesthetic state of affairs) and so on.

What instances of the new art have in common is, primarily, their forceful deviation in at least one respect from the characteristics of art as we have come to conceive of it since the renaissance.

This revolution is not a revolution of style. The new art is not the latest of the thousand -isms. Arguably, it is not art at all. But if it is not art it is certainly something else quite subtly related to art as we knew it, and not to be assimilated conceptually to sport or fashion or lunacy, or any other readymade set of ideas.

Of the available and receptive modes for the new activity, lunacy is the most attractive. The new artist's constructions are fantasies acted out in the world as if their author were sovereign, and could command reality. But there is a power, if not a method, in this madness. It is something like the power of the traditional fool - that the modern eccentric does not, as such, possess - to make his audience at least temporarily uneasy about who has the better grasp of reality.

There was, of course, an institution of the professional fool that gave him part of his authority, the rest coming from his own power of imagination and calculated audacity. What is lacking, for the modern analogy, is an institution of the new arthood that will serve to keep the artists out of a grimmer sort of institution, or at any rate out of group therapy.

The institutions of art as we have come to know them will not do. Certainly some of the exhibitors at Mildura have been made prominent, even in some cases famous, by the gallery and art investment system and they should be able to trade on their old credentials for a while, like retired generals and emeritus professors. But this can't, and shouldn't, last. Sooner or later artists whose work is maverick and uncollectable will have to contrive both a source of income and a source of authority for a public activity that must otherwise dissolve into desultory, freakish hooliganism.

Professional fools were once appendages of courts, and they are a waning institution. I wonder whether their successors, could work through public pensions and whether modern societies will be ready to find a way to pay and protect their most cunning dreamers? Somehow it must be done, or we are condemned to purgatory around the galleries, bickering about the picture-plane and felt quality, if not to eternal damnation in the museum without walls, where nobody would dare scatter fresh eggs or plant explosives, for fear of the wrath of the everlasting curator.

Source: *Nation Review*, 11th May 1973

