

Australian Perspecta 1981: Into a Perspective - Betty Kelly

Foreword to Australian Perspecta 1981 by The Director Edmund Capon

The Art Gallery of New South Wales established a curatorial department for Contemporary Art in 1979 as part of a general reorganisation of the professional establishment. This reorganisation occurred as a result of a reassessment of the Gallery's activities and responsibilities, in which the absence of a particular responsibility for contemporary art was seen as a serious omission. The more radical developments in artistic expression that have evolved in the recent past, particularly those involving modes of expression outside the generally accepted confines, such as performance and video, not only opened up new and vastly broader avenues in terms of both content and expression, but also required critical skills and attitudes of a more adventurous and innovative nature to interpret them.

The Gallery's association with the Biennale of Sydney (the 4th Biennale of Sydney is scheduled for April/May 1982), an association which will assuredly continue, has established this Gallery in the forefront of such Australian institutions with an interest in the avant garde. It is an appropriate association reflecting the adventurous and innovative spirit in this area and one of the new department's principal responsibilities from now on will be to stage an Australian alternative to the Biennale, the Australian Perspecta, every other year.

This article does not enter the area of critical review but attempts to put *Perspecta* into an historical framework. The exhibition's accomplishment needs to be evaluated in the light of prevailing attitudes amongst artists and weighed against preceding methods for organising contemporary exhibitions.

The evidence presented demonstrates an historical gap between public galleries and contemporary art. As a biennial, *Perspecta* represents the attempt by one public gallery to narrow that gap.

Surveys of contemporary Australian art in public galleries have been few and far between. Exhibitions have often been less survey than theme shows. For the most part they have been non-recurring with the exception of the *Biennale of Sydney*, which intends predominantly to display international rather than Australian art. Another exception, the *Mildura Sculpture Triennials*, prior to earlier Biennales of Sydney, provided the only continuing major showcase for Australian work but suffered a limited audience due to its geographical position.

It has been felt, in some sectors, that urban centres have been overdue in presenting *continuing* exhibitions of current art. As *The Australian Sculpture Triennial* moves towards fulfilling this need for Melbourne although independent of the National Gallery of Victoria – so the Art Gallery of NSW's *Perspecta* exhibition does for Sydney. *Perspecta '81* ran from May 29-June 21.

In part, instrumenting Perspecta has been in response to a controversy prior to the 1979 Biennale. At that time it was felt there should be artist-elected representation on the Biennale Committee and a diverse number of artists expressed dissatisfaction with the ratio of Australian participation. It was proposed that there be equal Australian participation and equal representation of women artists. This situation was taken to indicate inadequate opportunity for the exposure of contemporary work and attitudes.

Perspecta, not limited to theme, will be the first recurring biennial exhibition of Australian contemporary art hosted by New South Wales' major public gallery. The result will be that more contemporary Australian and international art will be shown, although less Australian work is likely to be seen in the Biennales.

Tracing earlier surveys serves to place the first Australian Perspecta into an historical perspective.

In 1968, *The Field*, an exhibition with great impact, opened with the new National Gallery of Victoria in its Temporary Exhibitions Gallery. Subsequently it toured to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and thence into history. It was a large show (40 artists of which 3 were women) of contemporary Australian art. It "was biased to define one particular direction. It concentrated on the abstractionists and further restricted itself to an aspect thereof which one is reluctant to confine by terminology. But the words hard-edge, unit-pattern, colour-field, flat abstraction and minimal were all used"¹

It was not until 1973, five years later, that the National Gallery of Victoria organised another much smaller exhibition surveying new work by Australian artists (6 men, no women). The *Object and Idea* exhibition presented structural/conceptual work. In an introductory essay Brian Finemore (Curator of Australian Art) identified this show as the "reverse side of the coin" from *The Field* exhibition. *The Field*, he declared, "derives from 'constructive art' which derives from Duchamp-Dada with Cezanne as the predecessor in common".

Unlike works in *The Field* exhibition which were produced specifically for the large spaces that only public places can afford, Gregory Heath, in regard to the *Object and Idea* show stated "It is a pity the objects in this exhibition are housed in a gallery ...they do not belong in a gallery because they challenge the comfortable presuppositions by which art is compartmentalised into a corner of life; that dimension of them is stifled by a gallery". John Stringer, on the other hand stated, "If the museum is not to take its place with various other heroic, ambitious but useless monuments to noble aspirations, it cannot take exclusive refuge in the comfortable values of the past, but must express equal commitment to ideas and expression of the moment. Let us take courage in the fact that artists have not been alienated to our existing institutions and are prepared to work with us towards this salvation".

Other exhibitions have been generated by the National Gallery of Victoria, although with less seminal effect. Both exhibition concepts demonstrate a thematic singularity that would prove inadequate for a relevant survey of contemporary working attitudes.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales by comparison, presented a more catholic survey entitled *Recent Australian Art* in the same year as *Object and Idea* (1973).

Following an earlier survey in 1965 which marked the decline of abstract-expressionism in Australian art – and left a gap of eight years between surveys, *Recent Australian Art* introduced some "earth and ecology aspects of the new art which seem more dominant than urbanism. The new art included here is typical of its time in its attempt to show us the reality of the world, often in ephemeral installations of humble materials made especially for this exhibition. It is an art which proposes that all objects can be experienced as art, and that all people can be, to some extent, artists. It is an art which dislikes the idea of the artist as genius or freak, of art as a precious object or expensive capitalist commodity. It is probably, like all ambitious art, impossible, but it is an art which would like to destroy the distinction between art and life.'² (Of 46 artists, one was a woman.)

The catalogue for Recent Australian Art in retrospect, looks more like a transitional exhibition moving between 'generations' than a declaration for an avant garde, however, it foreshadowed a workable format for Perspecta '81.

1973 also marked the beginning of the *Biennale of Sydney*. Held in the newly opened Sydney Opera House, the exhibition presented international art, without Australian content. Contradicting its title, it was subsequently held in 1976 and 1979 at the Art Gallery of NSW with the peripheral involvement of commercial and alternative galleries.

During 1973, a fourth major occurrence happened with the addition of 'Sculpturescape' to the Mildura Triennial of that year. With Triennials under the direction of Tom McCullough from 1967, Mildura became a Mecca for Australian and New Zealand sculptors working in all mediums, including video and performance, until Tom McCullough's resignation and the City Council's burning of all available copies of his book which documented the 1978 event (see Art Network no 2). The exhibition was 'born again' this year as The First Australian Sculpture Triennial with Visual Arts Board and Victorian Ministry for the Arts backing and with further support from both La Trobe University and the Preston Institute of Technology, where McCullough directs the *Pitspace Gallery*. The Triennial included 220 artists of whom approximately 50 were women.

Mildura provided the blueprint for the 1976 Biennale, with Tom McCullough as the director. Australian and New Zealand content was introduced with its subsequent problems. It was a full three years before the following Biennale, under the direction of Nick Waterlow, moved away from the broad definition of sculpture towards the conceptual/performance arena and it will have been another three years before the next Biennale of Sydney begins in 1982, directed by Bill Wright.

The largely international Biennale will now stabilise with a regular two year showing in years alternate to the ongoing, and entirely Australian, Perspecta.

With Perspecta, neological liberty has been taken to establish a neutral title. For 1981, the Art Gallery of New South Wales has made funding of \$20 000 available. The idea for this exhibition was presented to the gallery only last year by Bernice Murphy, Curator of Contemporary Art, and dates were made available with only a few months notice. Bernice Murphy, has worked towards raising the number of women artists without disregarding standards of achievement. Although she realises this may not

satisfy all feminists, she feels the issue cannot be forced in one attempt. (Out of 64 artists, 23 were women.)

The current organisational rationale is illustrated in the following excerpt from Perspecta's catalogue notes by Bernice Murphy.

"This will be the first in a series of planned biennial exhibitions, representing a new venture on the part of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

With the now established presence of the Biennale of Sydney regularly bringing major contemporary and experimental forms of art from abroad before audiences in Sydney, the Art Gallery of New South Wales is initiating a regular overview of the evolving state of contemporary art in Australia, to occur in alternate years to the Biennale of Sydney.

Australian Perspecta 1981 – representing the work of some 64 invited artists – will be presented at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in May-June this year. The subsequent Australian survey is accordingly scheduled for 1983.

Such a pattern should ensure that at least one major exhibition of contemporary art is brought before the public in Sydney each year, and that there is a regular alternation between Australian and Foreign contemporary art, producing an on-going dialogue between the two.

The Australian Perspecta exhibitions are intended to expand and consolidate the public's exposure to recent and challenging forms of art evolving in Australia, and to strengthen Sydney's commitment to contemporary art."

In 1977, Ms Murphy proposed some personal suggestions in regard to the forthcoming Biennale (in 1979) at one of the many meetings that followed the first symposium at the Sculpture Centre during the 1976 Biennale. Amongst other ideas she wrote "The issue of women in art and women's art has been vociferously argued in earlier discussion about the development of the Biennale. The most trenchant form in which this issue has been advanced has been the call for 50% representation of women - on selection committees and in final representation of works. Since I take a different view, but don't wish to be misunderstood, I would like to indicate a few of my feelings on the women's art issue:

- a) the 50% demand seems to me too doctrinaire - dealing with the inequities by arbitrarily rearranging results that are not in phase with causes;
- b) feminism in art however, has contributed something new and altered possibilities in art very recently; it is still a radical influence on the experimental flank of contemporary art and should come through as such;
- c) instead of the 50% representation argument (I can't see that any definable group of people should be given prior-agreement right of representation in a Biennale on a ratio basis), I would propose that a complete section of the Biennale be addressed to Feminism in Art and that once established as a definite section, with its own advisory committee, quite different internal objectives and

selection considerations could come into play, more easily adjusted to the alternative attitudes and standards that the radical feminists have been concerned to advance, in opposition to other structures in the so called art world."

The *Artworkers Union* emerged out of the continuing discussions after the 1976 Biennale. Ultimately public meetings were held in most states "To discuss setting up an Artists' Representative Organisation, an Artists' Union" based on a common agenda. The Artworkers Union's obvious concern with public exhibitions like the Biennale and Perspecta are those of equity for artists in areas of funding, representation, insurance, transport and other costs which may occur, such as hire of equipment etc, equal representation of the sexes as far as possible and establishing the principle of an artist's fee.

Nick Waterlow, Director of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, and the director of the last Biennale of Sydney, has stated that "the VAB always hoped the Biennale would become biennial and take on a permanent secretariat which it will be now forced to do because of the Art Gallery of NSW's commitment to The Australian Perspecta occurring every two years. Hopefully, Victoria and the other states will now feel the need to equal New South Wales' progress in this area. The VAB also hopes a new extension to the AGNSW's exhibitions' space will become available in the near future for forthcoming Biennales and Perspectas. The last Biennale created a great deal of controversy and this development (Perspecta and the Biennale of Sydney every two years) is exactly the outcome the Visual Arts Board had hoped for."

¹ From the catalogue introduction by Brian Finemore, Curator of Australian Art and John Stringer, Exhibitions Office

² From the introduction 'Recent Australian Art' by Frances McCarthy, Assistant Curator of Australian Art and Daniel Thomas, Senior Curator

Illustrations:

Peter Callas *Our Potential Allies* (left monitor) 1980

Sally Robinson *Mungo Shearing Shed* 1980

Vicki Varvaressos *Australian Nature Morte*, 1981

Peter Booth *Painting* 1981

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri & Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri *Painting on Canvas*, 1976

Davida Allen *Figure 5* 1979

Lorraine Jenyns *Self Portrait with Two Tigers* 1980

Richard Dunn *Tools of Coincidence*

Richard Dunn *Barricades*

Mike Parr *Parapraxis - Hitler & Bormann Awaiting Delacour*

Virginia Coventry: from *Whyalla – Not a Document 1977-81*

Peter Kennedy *November Eleven*

Dale Hickey *Cottlesbridge Landscape*