

OBITUARY: INHIBODRESS GALLERY, 1970-1972.

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Inhibodress Gallery will probably be only a small footnote in the history of Australian art, for it seems to have produced very little of lasting interest. Its importance at the present time lies in the way in which it epitomised a set of attitudes endemic to Australian art.

The Gallery was founded in late 1970, and it soon gained an aura of missionary zeal. The cooperative at first was mainly minor ex-tech students, with a crown of several known artists, (**John Armstrong, Bill Brown, Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy**). Two, Johnson and Kennedy, were of a known 'conceptual' (sic) bent. Their influence, however, was great, for by early 1971 several artists who in the inaugural exhibition had shown work of various nondescript styles, suddenly began to produce weak 'conceptual' work. (**Mike Parr** and **Terry English** are typical examples). There was a determined presentation of the gallery as 'avant-garde' = 'conceptual' = 'international', and a professional public relations setup was organised to promote this equation. In spite of the large number of contributors to the cooperative, there were very few shows that did not contribute to this hastily tailored image, hence the identification of the gallery with a very small number of artists, who each had to hold several one man shows a year to keep the program full. There was a constant drain of contributors, and the withdrawal of **Tim Johnson** in late 1971, leaving only **Kennedy** and **Parr** of any importance, meant the standard was bound to drop. It did, and this year after a series of uninteresting shows by minor overseas artists, and a joint show in which **Kennedy** and **Parr** displayed all the internationally fashionable vocabulary of biting, slashing and gouging, the gallery finally closed, last month.

There are several interesting points to be made about all this. First, artists have displayed the habit throughout the entire history of Australian art, of espousing a style in name and technique without any apparent understanding of its origins or real meaning. At **Inhibodress** this was more obvious than usual, and in more ways than one; the most typical work was usually blatantly plagiaristic (as any reader of **Studio International** will tell you). The much proclaimed 'unsaleability' of the work shown at **Inhibodress** seems to have been brought about more by the poor quality of the work than any other factor (except perhaps incompetent marketing; it has been demonstrated throughout the world that 'conceptual' art is much easier to market than paintings). The real issue of recent art, the alteration of the convention 'art' by investigating and altering the context in which it exists, was lost in the rush to create a new Formalism. In other words, like the Australian abstract-expressionists (who were neither abstract, nor expressionist) and the Australian impressionists (who preferred **Bastien Le Page** to **Monet**), the **Inhibodress** group produced mongrel work of dubious stylistic parentage and no intelligible (or even intelligible) content.

Second, to match the opportunism of the artists, the opportunism of the critics produced some bizarre judgments. **Donald Brook**, probably the most consistently intelligent art critic in Australia, saw **Inhibodress**, at first, as his own baby, since it claimed to embody most of the attitudes to art which he had for many years preached. Therefore, in review after review, he declared his stillborn infant to be alive and

kicking, and growing stronger every month, to the amazement of his supporters and the ever more derisive sneers of his detractors.

To criticise *Inhibodress* would have been to attack his own critical stance, and on the horns of this dilemma his normally sound judgment apparently deserted him. **Elwyn Lynn**, on the other hand, did the right thing for the wrong reason, and just ignored *Inhibodress*'s existence most of the time. **Terry Smith**, whose comments are usually as fatuous as they are superficial was, as usual as fatuous as he was superficial. For **Daniel Thomas**, life went on as usual. **Bruce Adams**, newly arrived in the middle of it all, just followed **Donald Brook**. And **James Gleeson**, who rarely has a nasty word to say about anyone, didn't have a nasty word to say about them either, once he had recovered from his initial feeling that they were nihilistic. He decided they were the natural heirs to the **Dadaists** and the **Surrealists**, but he meant it as a compliment. Overall, there was no real analysis of the quality of the work, just a vague criticism of the style it claimed to represent, and of which it was not a good example. It was tacitly assumed that art produced in Sydney Australia must have a causal connection with art from somewhere else in the world, and that the main influence and inspiration for Australian art must be an awareness of 'provincialism'. In making art, the purpose was to banish 'provincialism' (rather than to analyse and influence reality and experience) with the aim of getting into an 'international mainstream'. It is a child's game of pretend that seems to underlie all Australian thinking about the avant-garde; if one pretends to be a genius for long enough, one morning you will wake up to find you have become one. Because of it, the concept of the 'avant-garde' has taken such a battering in the last two years it is doubtful if it will ever recover. **Robert Hughes** comment that he liked *Inhibodress* because it was 'international' is illuminating here, because his apparent criteria are based on a self-conscious view of Australian provincialism, the yokel intellectual parent which might shame him if his sophisticated New York friends ever met her. Better she be uninteresting but trendy than old-fashioned and eccentric.

Third, like **Central Street** before it, *Inhibodress* seemed to embody a peculiar romantic ideal of the artist, behind the cool facade. Those seemed to view themselves as non-conformists rejected by a society which in fact barely knew they existed, much less cared (see, for instance, the photo in the **Bulletin**, Aug. , of **Kennedy and Parr**, up against the wall but their chins out to take the blow). They were 'anti-commercial' and the work was 'unsaleable' a good revolutionary stance which they made financially viable by charging admittance instead and they were against the 'gallery system' but they ran a gallery when the work they showed could have been as easily distributed in other ways. They succeeded in being judged on their stated motives and intentions, which were chic radical ('we're not career minded like other Sydney conceptual artists') rather than their actions and results, which were derivative and dull. And in spite of their supposed rejection by society and the art world, they were always well reviewed, and supported by substantial grants from the **Arts Council**. Their continual self-contradiction was apparently born of a lack of even superficial self-analysis.

Finally, one positive result has been that the critical fixation with *Inhibodress* and 'official' avant-gardism has accidentally created the seeds of a real avant-garde situation in parts of the Sydney art world. Working outside the gallery system by choice, unreviewed although not particularly unknown, there have appeared several

young artists producing work more sophisticated and less self conscious than that of **Inhibodress**. **Inhibodress** is hopefully the last of its kind in the history of Australian society.

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