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The necessity of (un) Australian art history: writing for the New World

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the necessity of (un)australian art history

writing for the new world

'If we [Australians] produced good art its Australian characteristics were of no importance.' Clement Greenberg[1]

"The great and universal in art and in criticism always arises from close observation and sympathy with local surroundings..." Bernard Smith[2]

The Australian artworld has never looked better. There are more art journals, exhibition spaces and art graduates than ever. Even globalisation has been a boon to local artists, especially Indigenous ones. But there is a catch. There may be plenty of interesting artists from Australia but few aspire to make Australian art. If Rex Butler is right, the desire now is for 'unAustralian' art.[3]

'UnAustralian' is an attractive epitaph for our times, especially since the Howard government has reduced the term to a political cliché. However Butler's sights are elsewhere. He is responding to the impact of globalisation and its indifference to national and ethnic boundaries. The classic case is the diva of the international artworld, Tracey Moffatt. Her beguiling works begin with the assumption that Australia and its myths (including Aboriginality) are chimeras – in both senses of the term. In tracing universal emotions of attachment, aggression and erotic experience in the ghosts that haunt the memories of our times, she escaped the identity politics that threatened to constrain her career and art. Gordon Bennett, beginning with the same assumption as Moffatt and at much the same time, achieved a similar end by a different route. More than any other Australian artist of the 1990s, he built his career on the persistent deconstruction of 'Australia'. Has there ever been an artist more deliberately unAustralian, who more thoroughly excised the Australian from Australia? Then, leaving the idea of Australia in ruins, or perhaps bored with his sedition, he has ventured to other zones of the postcolonial imperium. Recently he veered into the universal imperatives of abstraction as if finally lost to Greenberg.

Not since the era of the formalesque has the universal (albeit cast in new attire) had such a run and the parochial seemed so passé. The ramifications go beyond Australian art to all national cultures, and beyond that to the discipline of art history itself, which until now has primarily been a discourse of national cultures. The adjective in 'Australian art' signifies not a geographical zone but an anachronistic ideology of nationalism. However its discourse - that hoary mix of isolation, anxiety, loss, mateship and whiteness served up in allegories of the bush, the outback and Aborigines - no longer has any traction in the new zones of contact fermented by globalisation. Indeed, this has been the case for at least forty years. Clinching his case, Butler points to Indigenous art, the most successful local product of recent times, which contests head on many of the assumptions of Australian art. While it might seem self-evident that there could be nothing more Australian than Indigenous art, it challenges the smooth narrative of Australian art history. This is not because Australian art historians have lacked vision[4] but because the idea of 'Australia' was founded and sustained on the notion of *terra nullius*. The very idea of a booming Indigenous art market after 200 years of colonisation is an absurdity if the idea and history of Australian art is taken seriously.

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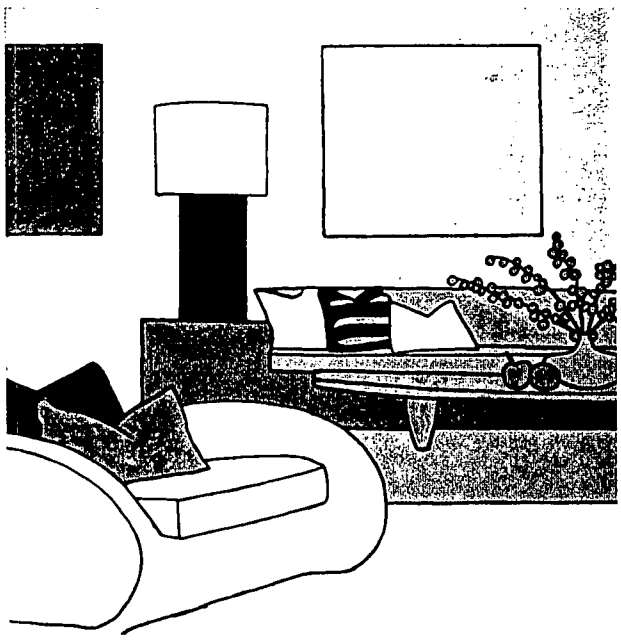
According to Terry Smith, throughout the twentieth century critics of Australian art were single-mindedly concerned with the question: 'when and how did this art become Australian?'[5] If Butler is right, this is now the wrong question. Paradoxically, the more successful Australian and Aboriginal artists become, the more irrelevant Australian art and Australian art history seem.

However, to call this a crisis for Australian art history ignores the fact that it has always lived close to the bone. The world has never been much interested in either Australian art or Australian art history. Most Australian art historians teach and research European and US art. Even critics of Australian art remain fixated by the gaze of this Old World. They only noticed Aboriginal art because it 'had an air of sophistication that related it to the most modern [i.e. European] innovations in geometric abstraction.' Reviewing an exhibition of Arnhem Land bark paintings in 1961, Alan McCulloch could only see a 'Soulages, Singier or Manessier.'[6] The last thing many Australian artists and critics have ever wanted was to appear parochial. Thus unAustralian is hardly a new ambition in Australian art and criticism.

The perennial fear of parochialism is well-founded. The parochial is a lame duck without the universal: without its leaven, art does not rise to the occasion. This is why Australian critics have largely remained under the spell of an Old World art history and its universal claims even when, like Bernard Smith, they resisted it. And this is the nub of the 'Australian' problem: there seems no way past the mismatch between parochial Australia and the universal imperatives



of the larger artworld. Will unAustralian art fare any better? Not if history is any guide.

In Old World art the universal usurped the parochial somewhere between Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550) and Winkelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764). Vasari was firmly attached to both his native Italy and his own generation of artists, believing that art reached its apogee with his mentor Michelangelo. However Winkelmann focused on a more nebulous, philosophical and universal notion of 'fine art' or 'good taste', which, he said, reached its zenith two thousand years earlier in ancient Greece. Dresden, where Winkelmann hailed from, had no place in his Enlightenment discourse of the universal.

Yet if art history was born on the wing of the universal, it arrived in the academy as the handmaiden of nationalist narratives. German intellectuals played the key role, developing a notion of Germanic art based on Romantic notions of local types. Even the Louvre, that font of the universal, began organising its collections according to national discourses after the 1848 revolution. Winkelmann was their mentor on two counts: he had explained Greek art as the rise and fall of a national zeitgeist;[7] and the parochialism of national (European) cultures was overcome by establishing a nexus with the universal taste of classical art. The German art historian Aloïs Riegl, for example, distinguished between the progressive naturalism of 'Germanic' art and the regressive spiritualism of the Italians,[8] believing that the former was closer in spirit to Greek antiquity. This classical universal was an essential ingredient in the nineteenth-century rush towards nationalism because it confirmed the superiority of European art and civilisation, searing its parochial concerns and debates into the hearts and minds of all people across their global empires.

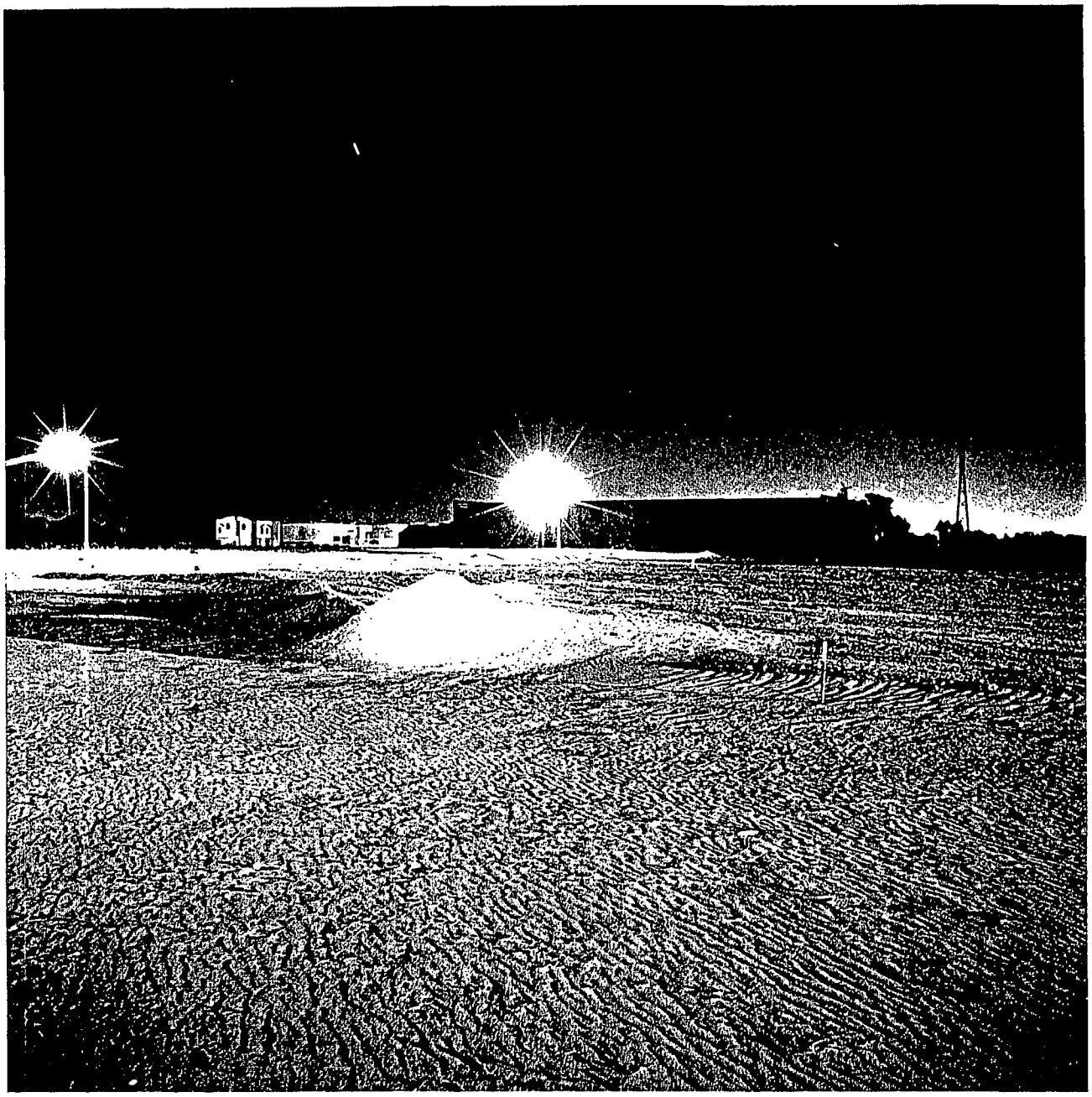
ABOVE: John Citizen *Interior (Timeless)* 2005, 152 x 152 cm, acrylic on linen.
FACING PAGE: *Interior (Finesse)* 2005, 152 x 152 cm, acrylic on linen.

The universal might only be an idea, and a suspect one at that, but it has very real effects on the local. Consider modernist (i.e. formalesque) French art and its exemplary representative, Henri Matisse. Parisian claims on the universal and not anything quintessentially Parisian in Matisse's art underwrite its Frenchness. After all, the art of France's colonies were more important to him than the neoclassicism of official Parisian culture. Like most modernists Matisse was not even Parisian: he was born near the border of France and Belgium and the most interesting developments in his art occurred outside of Paris. His biographer, Hilary Spurling, even calls him Flemish (i.e. Germanic) rather than French. I prefer to think of him as Australian, as the key turning point in his development of a modernist style was meeting the Australian painter John Peter Russell – as Matisse acknowledged when he named his two children born soon after this encounter, Jean and Pierre.

Matisse's art nevertheless remains quintessentially French. The reason is the same one that brought Russell from Sydney to Paris: a hegemonic Eurocentric Old World art history in which Parisian art enjoyed the unchallenged mandate of the universal. However all art is shot through with the universal: it speaks not just to its *habitus* (or phenotype) but also across cultures to basic human needs (to a shared genotype). But when one place only, such as Athens or Paris, is made the gateway to the universal, everywhere else descends to the merely parochial, second hand and second rate – unless it can somehow pass through this portal of the universal. It is this lack that delimits and even defines Australian art. The pull of the universal is strongest when it is most lacking, and few have felt its lack as strongly as Australians.

Why, then, when the halo has irretrievably slipped from both nationalism and the claims of Eurocentric universalism, does Old World history remain so dominant? Admittedly, its resilience is due in part to its brilliance. Its continuing authority is not just a legacy of European colonial power or the racist dogma that informs its spirit, but also due to the success of the US artworld at appropriating Old World art history for itself. The latter was an audacious move by elements in the US artworld, underwritten by the global dominance of US power and the rapid retreat of European influence after World War 2. However it was also a missed opportunity to develop a New World art history more suited to our rezoned times.

The resilience of Old World art history, despite the disappearance of the imperialist ideology that initially underwrote its hegemony, is the main reason why local (including national) non-European art histories are more necessary than ever. Here Australian art historians have something of an edge. Their limits crowd their articulation wherever they turn. Even those proud Antipodean proclamations of the parochial (eg. McCubbin, Preston) are undone by constant complaints about a lack not evident in the art of Europe. Without the universal, the denials and negative movements that characterise deconstruction overtake Australian art and criticism.



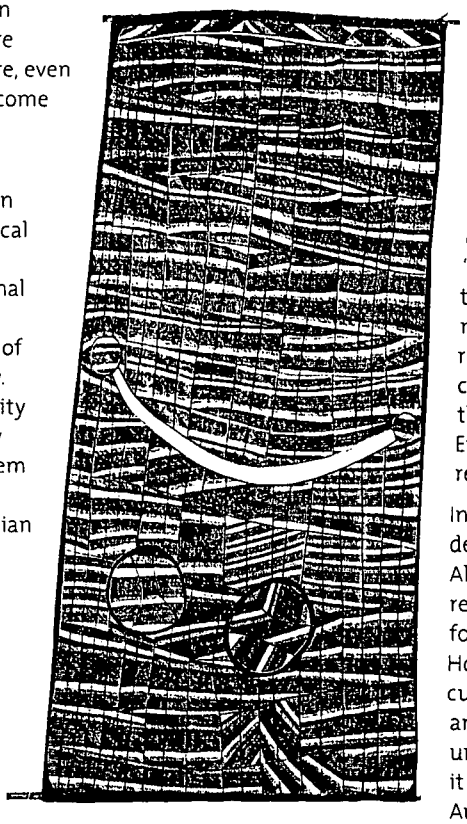
Since its initial formulation in the imagination of European mythographers, the idea of 'Australia' has been an agent of deconstruction. While we Australians might think Australia is an actual place, it remains a utopian concept (i.e. a no-place), categorically bound to the dystopia it protests. Think of how the terms 'Australian' and 'unAustralian' are deployed in the popular press today: the difference between them is difficult to gauge: it is a matter of dissemination rather than categorical differences. For example, Prime Minister Howard's very unAustralian grovelling to President Bush turns out to be quintessentially Australian – much like Norman Lindsay's dream of classical antiquity in the Antipodes. Australia, a nation established primarily around the idea of a white bastion in a hostile black empire, now sports Aboriginal art as its national emblem. These paradoxes are what make Australian art history both richly ambivalent and self-deconstructive. While other national art histories are equally ambivalent, 'Australia' provides no cover. Hence, when the former Minster for Education Brendan Nelson is forced to name those inviolable Australian values to be inculcated in immigrants he can only spill out a few universals, clichés like mateship, tolerance and egalitarianism. Here the emperor truly stands naked.

This is not a new idea. In the first fully articulated history of Australian art, written by Bernard Smith, the idea of a national art was a myth to push against rather than an origin to locate and nail down: thus Smith's opposition to Aboriginalism and the Jindyworobaks and his repudiation of a grovelling internationalism.

ABOVE: Tony Nathan *Untitled 1011* (2005) inkjet print, 100 x 100 cm, from *Proof of Light* series. **FACING PAGE:** John Mawurndjul *Mardayin Design at Dilebang* 2003, earth pigments on bark, 212.5 x 108.5 cm. Presented to National Gallery of Victoria through NGV Foundation by Anita Castan, Nellie Castan, Judith and Leon Gorr, and Ricci Swart. Licensed by Viscopy Sydney, 2005.

For Smith the universal is not so easily bought. 'A culture cannot live upon other people's universals. It requires moral values born of its own historical experience, values which are continuously tested against the successive challenges of its history.' [9]

The current turbulence in the idea of Australian art repeats a familiar scenario: again we are grabbing for the universal: this time in globalism and Aboriginal art. The real edge Indigenous art enjoys today is not its Australianness (who today would want this omen foisted on them) but that its claims on the universal are widely recognised in Australia and elsewhere, even Paris. Is this why Australian art wants to become aboriginal?



If Australian art cannot rise to the occasion what about unAustralian art? Butler's notion is the most refreshing idea to enter the critical arena for a long time because it reminds us that the recent deconstruction of our national myths has rarely escaped the gravitational pull of nationalism. Nevertheless, the shock of unAustralian harbours a strange familiarity. When I studied fine arts at Monash University in the late 1970s, Australian art had recently managed to escape the provincialism problem via Greenberg's gift: that conceptualist trapdoor of a universal avant-garde. Australian art was the last thing we students were interested in. For us the emphasis of the 'global village' fell firmly on the adjective, not the noun. Such was the indifference to Australian art that the Papunya painting movement was totally overlooked. My professor, Patrick McCaughey, was a great supporter of contemporary Australian art when it matched the best of what was being made elsewhere (by which he meant USA). But McCaughey was a patriot compared to what followed. The most influential artworld product of this period (i.e. the progeny of the 1970s) was postmodernism, *Art & Text* style. According to its founding editor, Paul Taylor, also a student of McCaughey, the artists he was interested in 'don't really have a lineage within Australian art, they are just isolated instances ... one looks at how other countries are using their local histories, and I refute the stupid notion that Australians are going to 'naturally' use Aboriginal motifs and are going to draw on the cultures of South East Asia and this kind of rubbish.'[10] This is because Taylor considered Australia a place in which identity is merely a series of transient appropriations of images from the electronic media that circulated the world. You can't get more unAustralian than this. Yet his postmodern rhetoric merely put a new spin on an old colonial idea that settlers, lacking an original culture, constitute their sense of place with discourses from elsewhere.

Taylor's (un)Australian postmodernism inaugurated the era of 'locality fails' that increasingly overwhelms us. It has meant different things to different artists: but as with Moffatt and Bennett the result has been the search for new ways to frame meaning (i.e. new universals). Being as parochial as I can, take the Perth artist Tony Nathan as a typical example. His photographs invest the temporary zones of suburban development – no subject could be more mundane and parochial – with a sublime content as if these erasures of locality and memory are so burdened with histories of feelings they cannot be articulated. In all such dissolutions of place (from Bennett to Nathan), Australia, outpost of an Old World European culture, is refigured into zones of loss and reformation. It is something that those classical connoisseurs of place, Indigenous artists such as John Mawurndjul, have also been doing in spectacular fashion. And lets not forget the critics. Paradoxically, the age of 'locality fails' proved a great boon to Australian art history. Butler might dismiss these new histories as revisionist, but Australian art history can, by necessity, be nothing else – for this is the mode of deconstruction. Even Smith's first history was revisionist.

In many respects the current developments of globalism and Aboriginal art identified by Butler revisit the crisis of definition that both founded and nurtures Australian art. Hopefully, rather than replay it, they cut back to the frame of Australian art history. Maybe they might even unhinge it. If this is unAustralian, it only confirms the necessity of Australian art history in the imagining of a New World art history.

1 Clement Greenberg as paraphrased by Elwyn Lynn, in a talk to the Contemporary Art Society (NSW), 24.06.68; reported in Elwyn Lynn, 'Clement Greenberg Sees Australia', *Art & Australia* Vol 6 no 2, September 1968, p152.

2 Bernard Smith, 'The modern frontier' *Westerly* no 3, 1959 pp16-17.

3 Rex Butler has begun to broach this idea in a few recent articles and talks. See 'A Short History of unAustralian Art', *Broadsheet*, Vol 32 no 4 March 2003; 'Introduction', *Radical Revisionism*, IMA, Brisbane, 2005; and 'Curse of the Contemporary', *Interesting Times*, ed. Russell Storer, MCA, 2005.

4 The recent desire to write an Australian art history that includes Indigenous art is not actually that new. Bernard Smith, for example, long believed that Aboriginal art was Australian art, and The Commonwealth Government's Inquiry into a National Art Gallery (the Lindsay Report), tabled in 1966, recommended that 'Aboriginal work is intended to be included in Australian art; it should be acquired not for anthropological reasons but for aesthetic merits.'

5 Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 2002, p9.

6 Alan McCulloch, 'The Aboriginal Art Exhibition, *Meanjin* Vol 20 no 2, 1961 p191.

7 See Keith Moxey, 'Art Histories Hegelian Unconscious: Naturalism as Nationalism in the Study of Early Netherlands Painting' *The Practice of Persuasion* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001, pp8-41.

8 Aloïs Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* translated Jacqueline E. Jung, Zone Books, 2004, p78.

9 Bernard Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini* 1980 Boyer Lecture, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1980.

10 Christina Davidson, 'Interview: Paul Taylor' *Art Network* 10, Winter 1983, p47.

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