Australian Left Review
No 77 Sept, 1981
Culture and politics
The Razor Gang
Poland in revolt
IN THIS ISSUE

Cultural workers and their concerns make up a large part of this issue. Introduced by Mike Donaldson, on behalf of the ALR Editorial Collective, a series of interviews with Laurel Quillen of Newcastle, Marie Armstrong and Miriam Hampson of Sydney New Theatre, and Gregor Cullen of Wollongong, together with articles by Pete Cockcroft, Terry Smith and Tom Appleton, each address themselves to various aspects of cultural life in Australia and New Zealand.

In Economic Notes, Gavan Butler examines the capitalist strategy behind the activities of the Razor Gang.

Mavis Robertson comments on the film Rosie the Riveter while interviewing its director, Connie Field.

Denis Freney, who visited Poland in August, writes of the continuing ferment in that country as democratic practice develops.

Australian Left Review will appear quarterly until mid-1982 when the frequency of publication will be reviewed. Future issues are planned for December 1981, March and June 1982.

It is welcome news that an editorial group has begun to function in Melbourne. This group will produce at least one of the issues of ALR in 1982.

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Subscriptions: $6.00 for six issues. Surface or airmail postage to be added to overseas subs. Students, apprentices, pensioners: $4.00. Single copies $1.00 each.

Australian Left Review
Box A247, Sydney South PO, Sydney 2000.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the articles in this issue of *Australian Left Review* concern the relationship between art and politics, cultural workers and the production of culture. The issues are not new to the left, but at this time of deepening crisis, after two decades of comparative silence, they are being debated again. The people speaking here, are practitioners rather than theoreticians, toilers at the face, as it were, of cultural production. Their concerns are immediate and practical: What does it mean to be a politically conscious art worker during a period of crisis? How should one produce culture and for whom? What should be produced and why?

Tom Appleton, in New Zealand, reports on Komikabaret, a theatre group seeking to bring politics to theatre-goers in the form of a Brechtian revival. Komikabaret seeks to encourage those on the left who may have little time for theatre to become more appreciative of that art form, while at the same time it introduces more regular patrons to a different content.

A central concern of Laurel Quillen and the Newcastle Cultural Action Group has been for whom performances are undertaken.

In accepting that the playhouse can be an alien place for working people, Quillen and fellow-activists have promoted performances in more familiar environments such as the Workers’ Club. Like Komikabaret, Quillen is less concerned with the nature of theatre, and more preoccupied with where and for whom it is undertaken.

The content of the Newcastle Cultural Action Group’s performances, like that of New Theatre, is oriented towards presenting working class audiences with a positive self-image. Marie Armstrong’s and Miriam Hampson’s account of New Theatre draws on a rich working class cultural tradition; New Theatre has an experience of almost fifty years.

Peter Corris gave up a promising academic career as a historian to write popular fiction, and in large measure his choice was predicated on the belief that intellectual and cultural work should have a popular form and mass audience. Corris has written three novels based around the Cliff Hardy character, a private-eye and Sydney-sider.

The problems of form and content are sharply posed in a private-eye genre, which contains aspects of social criticism and a pervasive human warmth, but is rooted in, for example, sexism. How does a socially concerned writer cope with a genre the definitive characteristics of which are in part anti-socialist?

Gregor Cullen and Michael Callaghan who constitute RedBack Graphix are two professional artworkers who, concerned over the lack of mass access to the products of their “genre”, lead them to reject it. After five years at a College for Fine Arts and some time working as a canvas artist, Cullen decided that canvas painting was not economically viable for most art workers and politically inappropriate for a cultural activist. Commitment to class struggle has meant for Cullen not the rejection of craft and professional standards and skills, but a search for ways in which they could be more directly utilised for the labor movement. Cullen seeks a mass audience through poster art and art work for widely distributed leaflets and booklets.

*Australian Left Review* believes that these issues are as important in our times as they were previously. We welcome the interest of our contributors and would welcome just as much any further contributors reporting other experiences or commenting on the points-of-view already expressed.

— Mike Donaldson, for the Editorial Collective.
POLAND'S REVOLT

by Denis Freney, who was in Poland in July, at the time of the PUWP Congress
The Polish people's revolt is now a year old. That, in itself, makes it unusual in attempts to develop socialist democracy, for example, in Czechoslovakia.

But perhaps the single most important and unique aspect of the Polish experience is that the momentum for change came from the base — from the organised working class itself. The workers, organised in Solidarity, remain the force for change.

In Poland, the working class is officially the ruling class. This is consecrated in the national constitution and in the Party's ideology. But the reality of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was, and remains, a dictatorship by the Party and the state apparatus in the name of the working class. It, in fact, became a dictatorship over the proletariat.

In 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976 and 1980, the working class (or, in 1968, the students and intellectuals) revolted against this dictatorship, around demands to do with civil liberties, prices and food supplies. But in a country where strikes were, by definition, counter-revolutionary, this became a revolt against the political and economic system itself.

**Workers shot**

On two occasions — in 1956 and 1970 — the police shot down many workers. Government and Party leaders lost their official positions, but the system was not substantially changed. In 1968 and 1976, the movements were crushed and dozens of workers, students and intellectuals jailed.

The unique aspect of the Polish workers' movement is its long history as an independent force, and the maturity it developed politically and organisationally.

The independent existence and growing maturity of the Polish working class challenged the rationale of the regime as no other force could. In the stalinist period up to 1956, the apparatus — the bureaucracy — in its vast majority believed in its own ideology and self-proclaimed historic mission as the representative of, or substitute for, the working class. By the 'seventies, its majority was cynical and self-seeking.

By the time workers staged their successful revolt in August 1980, there was widespread corruption throughout the apparatus and society. The opening of the Polish economy to multinational penetration contributed to this corruption.

The degeneration also became ideological: the anti-semitism of 1966-68 broke with the historic traditions of marxism. The traditional anti-semitism of the Polish people was seen as a means of diverting the workers. But worse, there was, and remains, a strand in the bureaucracy which is itself deeply anti-semitic.

The Party-State justified its rule in large part by the economic and social advances achieved. These remained within an ideological framework under which socialism and then communism would be achieved, primarily through economic advance. Thus, the question of socialist democracy could be marginalised.

In Poland, the Gierek leadership so undermined the basis of economic and social advancement that this rationale of the Party-State was brought into question.

The economic collapse is most visible in the field of food production and supply. Poland is agriculturally rich, yet the struggle to find the most basic foodstuffs means that workers and their families must queue for hours to get enough to eat. Some cases of malnutrition have even been recorded. After hours of patient queueing, workers have so far been able to find enough to eat. But, in the coming winter, real hunger may appear.

Even more maddening for the Poles is the virtual non-existence of other basics: soap, detergents, shampoo, cigarettes, matches and cooking oil. Alongside this is the flourishing black market, fed by the wholesale hijacking of food supplies and other essentials. The sacking of hundreds of officials for corruption (though few have been tried) has not allayed the suspicion that corruption
continues at all levels and worsens the effect of the crisis.

Food distribution in Poland has always been a problem. Centralised internal trade leads to the most irrational shortages and then over-supply. The chaos has worsened markedly in recent years. Because of its immediate impact on workers, the problems in the internal distribution system symbolise the deficiencies of a centralised bureaucratic system on the whole economy. Corruption only worsens the inbuilt inefficiency of the system.

Nor is it enough to blame all the current ills on the previous Gierek government. The Kania leadership has had an admittedly difficult task balancing the need to respond to mass pressures for significant social and political reform against the objective constraints imposed by Soviet policies. But it has now been in power for a year and workers see few significant changes in their economic situation yet taking place. Until the inefficient centralised bureaucracy’s control over the economy is removed, and workers themselves feel in control of the economy and society, nothing substantial can be achieved.

In such a situation, to simply raise prices to real levels (an essential part of any economic reform) or to cut rations, is a recipe for a social explosion with disastrous consequences.

The Polish working class is an independent force. For the past year, workers have put their faith in Solidarity which is their organisation. But, like all massive organisations, Solidarity is open to bureaucratisation, thus becoming isolated from its base.

Allegiances can change rapidly and people can be moved by the dynamics of the situation. There is no guarantee that the unity which is now expressed in support for Solidarity is permanent. It could be shattered if Solidarity does not satisfy the workers’ aspirations and needs.

Given the past, there is no real prospect that the workers would then turn to the Party. Rather, their frustration could explode into actions outside the control of Solidarity’s leadership, risking Polish or Soviet armed intervention. Alternatively, demagogues who are blindly anti-socialist such as KPN (Confederation for Independent Poland), or provocateurs from any number of secret services, could take control.

That perspective was put to me time and again by Solidarity activists and independent observers. It is in that framework that we must also measure classifications in the western media of “moderates” or “centre forces”, and “radicals” or “extremists”.

**The Party**

Where does the Party – the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP) – stand in this dangerous situation?

By August 1980, the credibility of the PUWP among the workers had been very seriously weakened. The Party is identified with serious acts of police repression, economic mismanagement, censorship, widespread corruption and gross inefficiency.

The Party was the State; the State was the Party. Even during the last Party Congress, Party leaders of all varieties spoke of improving relations between the Party and “the public”. Implicitly, they were talking of relations between the rulers and the ruled, which corresponds to the reality.

The Party leadership changed after August 1980, but the over-riding goal remained: to maintain the Party as the ruler of the country and to limit as much as possible the powers of Solidarity.

The first four months of 1981 were marked by the continuing bitter rearguard resistance of the Party leadership to Solidarity and its legal registration, to Rural Solidarity and to the independent students’ union.

The Bydgoszcz incident, when police beat up Solidarity leaders, represented an attempt to control Solidarity as a legal organisation by force. After first trying to whitewash the incident, the Political Bureau was compelled to back down by a virtual uprising among the worker members of the Party.
The revolt of the Party's rank and file held the promise of a real renovation of the Party. The rank and file imposed democratic elections for the Extraordinary Party Congress. Hundreds of Party officials were swept aside. The "horizontal movement" in the Party began to organise across the country in opposition to the vertically-organised Party apparatus.

But the Party apparatus proved too strong. It was itself pressured by the Soviet letter of June 5 to reassert control over both the country and the Party.

Armed with the Soviet letter, applying various forms of pressure on those active in the horizontal movement, and appealing to the heavily-centralised version of "democratic centralism", the apparatus banned the horizontal movement. It sacked its leader, Z. Iwanow, and others, from leading positions, and convinced many that the democratic reforms in election procedure were enough. The horizontal movement disappeared by July.

Congress delegates

The election of delegates to Congress resulted in a substantial majority for the Kania leadership, together with a vocal and confident conservative minority. Most delegates were inexperienced in the political activity of a Party Congress. They were inclined to accept the proposals of the Party leadership. But, at the same time, many of them reflected the concerns of their fellow workers.

Symbolic of this contradiction was an impromptu debate in the corridors outside the congress hall, broadcast on Polish TV. A group of worker delegates spoke out militantly before the cameras, saying the Party had to be a real workers' party and they even supported Solidarity's self-management plan. Then, another delegate, an official, entered the circle and put the official line: discipline, democratic centralism, Marxism-Leninism .... Code-words in Poland for the status quo.

Within a few moments, those worker delegates who had been so outspoken were nodding in agreement. Then they spoke out in support of him in almost total contradiction to what they had said a few minutes before!

The Central Committee elected at the Congress reflects the political composition of the delegates although it has a disproportionate representation of conservatives. The Political Bureau and the Secretariat reflect more the choice of the Kania leadership.

The first Central Committee meeting after the Congress supported the leadership's opposition to Solidarity's proposals for self-management and economic reform. It is not excluded that, in the future, the Central Committee and the Party rank and file may actively oppose the leadership's confrontationist tactics against Solidarity. But, for the moment, the reforming movement within the Party has been contained within the current leadership's perspectives and tactics.

Inside Solidarity, the period after Bydgoszcz has also been a testing one. Walesa's unilateral action in calling off the strikes protesting against the Bydgoszcz incident led to a split with the "radical" elements who claim that it was not the decision itself they necessarily disagreed with, but the way Walesa acted.

Karol Modzelewski, one of the founders of the Polish opposition who was linked with KOR, resigned as Solidarity's national adviser. Solidarity's two vice-presidents, Lis and Gwiazda, were on the verge of resigning.

After Bydgoszcz, Solidarity's right to exist was firmly established. The focus of Solidarity's concern then moved to the economic crisis.

The government had placed its proposals for economic reform before parliament. The "radicals" in Solidarity were dissatisfied. First of all, they wanted the workers' councils to have the right to elect the factory directors. Second, they believed that any economic reform would be ineffective if the centralised
bureaucracy still retained the power to arbitrarily intervene in the enterprises.

The discussion on self-management in the first half of 1981 was mainly restricted to intellectuals and economic specialists. In June, Solidarity branches in the country’s 18 biggest factories met and decided to take up the demand of full self-management. These big 18 factories formed an informal “network” which sponsored a counter draft law on self-management and a series of conferences on the subject.

When a conference was called in Gdansk in early July, over 1,000 workplaces and factories sent delegates and endorsed this counter draft which, first of all, gave workers’ councils the right to elect directors and, second, gave economic freedom within a market mechanism.

At the Party Congress, the counter draft law was the subject of a major attack. It was described as “anti-socialist”, “restoring capitalism”, and so on.

After the Congress, and after the government unilaterally cut rations and raised prices, the question of self-management became the key political issue.

**Lech Walesa**

Walesa and those supporting him had propagated the idea that Solidarity should be simply a trade union in the traditional sense, leaving economic management to the government. But the dangers of such a concept, which allows strikes as well as compromise, clearly emerged in the explosion of anger against the price rises and ration cuts.

Within a few weeks, Walesa became an exponent of full self-management. Solidarity will therefore hold its first national congress in early September backing self-management.

Walesa’s change of position was also dictated by two other factors: first, the hardline government opposition expressed in its use of the media against Solidarity and, second, a survey which showed one-third of Solidarity members already disillusioned with what the organisation had achieved.

With the workers’ anger tinder-dry, the smallest spark could lead to riots and chaos. In such a situation, the “irresponsible” people were those who took a simple trade union line.

The decline of the Church’s influence inside Solidarity was another factor which changed the situation. The Church, before August 1980 the sole organisation independent of the Party and State, had been able to reinforce its traditional role in Poland as a focus for national identity. The Church became unhappy when Solidarity developed as a second and attractive independent force. It tried to take Solidarity under its wing through the influence it exerted over Walesa.

The Church hierarchy is a conservative social force: it certainly has no enthusiasm for full workers’ self-management. Its lack of enthusiasm is shared by Western governments and media.

The “radicals” recently felt strong enough to campaign against Church influence in Solidarity. They published in Solidarity Weekly an article asking “Is the Church trying to take over Solidarity?” Walesa acknowledged that both the Church and the Party had, indeed, tried to “take over” Solidarity, but that he had always insisted on its independence as a self-governing workers’ organisation.

Inside Solidarity, the balance has therefore shifted towards a decisive struggle for full self-management and a thorough economic reform. Only when the government agrees will Solidarity feel able to try to persuade the workers to accept price restructuring and other necessary sacrifices everyone will have to make.

Even if there is full self-management and a drastic cutback in the powers of the centralised bureaucracy, there will be at least four or five years of hardship ahead of the Polish people. The food shortages cannot be overcome overnight. Farmers must be given real freedom from bureaucratic control, and priority in supply of machinery. But even with that, and a fair payment for what they produce, farmers will continue to be
dissatisfied with the few consumer goods available to them.

Rural Solidarity has a key role to play in the coming period. In return for a genuine reform, it has to persuade farmers to produce as much as possible even if the real incentive to do so is limited by the reality.

How will the Soviet Union react to a genuine economic reform, including self-management? Is the Party leadership taking a hard line on these issues because it fears the Soviet Union will intervene militarily, at whatever cost, to stop such deep-going reforms?

No one really knows if this interpretation is correct. In any case, the centralised bureaucracy has its own interests to defend when it comes to self-management.

Any analysis which regards Soviet pressure as the central issue, and therefore imagines that a neat solution is acceptance of the government plan for limited economic reform and freezing the situation as it is, ignores the reality. The workers are an independent, volatile force. The situation is not one where you can expect the workers to passively accept any imposed solution.

If the situation were frozen, then the dangers of a spontaneous, uncontrolled explosion, demagogy and provocation are enormous. The dangers would grow as the economic crisis worsened and further Soviet intervention, perhaps including armed force, would be inevitable.

The implications of the Polish experience for Australian socialists is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, clearly, it demands as much consideration as did the Czechoslovak events in 1968. After 1968, the CPA and many other communist parties in Europe and elsewhere, re-evaluated their conception of the sort of socialist society they were fighting for.

The CPA adopted the model of self-management, extended to the whole of society, combined with a multi-party political system, independent trade unions and fuller civil liberties than exist in the most advanced capitalist democracy. As a model, it is good.

Now we see in Poland that such a model is, within the framework of Poland’s "geopolitical reality", at the centre of the workers’ demands. When a model becomes reality it can be a shock: the Party is often being led, not leading; the Church plays a role; many workers identifying communism with what existed in Poland are “anti-communist”; rightist, anarchist and other ideas are expressed.

This model upsets schemas which somehow see a socialist democracy in which the Party would still make the basic decisions and everybody outside it would bow spontaneously before the Party’s greater wisdom.

Socialist democracy certainly won’t be like that; Poland is a living example. Contradictory social forces will confront each other. There are many unexplored implications for socialists that require a more thorough analysis of what we mean by socialist democracy and self-management.

The need for a more detailed analysis of the "socialist countries" also arises from Polish events. The nationalised economic base certainly remains an historic achievement. In Poland, it means that no one talks of handing the factories over to the old or any new capitalists, but rather of putting these factories under workers’ self-management.

Poland has again posed that a nationalised economy may not be enough to allow us to describe such countries as "socialist" or even "socialist-based".

The credibility of communism and even of socialism in the capitalist world, above all in the advanced capitalist countries, depends in large part, on a joint effort by all marxists to develop such an analysis. That task has already begun, but it still has a long way to go.
On April 30, 1981, the Prime Minister presented the Ministerial Statement on the Review of Commonwealth Functions to Federal Parliament.1

The review is the report of the committee chaired by Philip Lynch and known generally as the Razor Gang. Many of the decisions which it covers have already been embodied in legislation. The preamble to the details of the decisions set out in the report employed the rhetoric of the "new conservatism", to which subject the last set of Economic Notes was addressed. It is clear, however, that — for all the rhetoric — the Razor Gang recommended only limited and very selective de-regulation. That has raised the possibility that the report is really a facade, that behind what can be immediately detected there lies a hidden agenda for the Fraser government.

The report of the Razor Gang

The decisions covered by the Review of Commonwealth Functions are listed under four categories involving (i) the transfer of functions to the private sector (ii) government regulation and assistance schemes (iii) the transfer of functions to the States, and (iv) the rationalisation of Commonwealth government activities. These Notes will deal only very cursorily with the last category but will then consider, in some detail, categories (ii) and (i) and (iii) in that order.

Rationalisation of Commonwealth Government Activities

The "rationalisation" of Commonwealth government activities involves some immediate steps and a number of reviews of activities.

The immediate steps include inter alia, the postponement of certain major capital works, reductions in funds available to departments and authorities, the termination of Mandata (the computerised staff management system), the termination of many advising committees, changes in the procedures of the Department of Social Security and the Commonwealth Employment Service, the reallocation of the
Australian Atomic Energy Commission's research establishment to the C.S.I.R.O., and the abolition of the Commonwealth Legal Aid Commission. The contribution which these moves were thought likely to make to a total reduction of over ten thousand persons employed by the Commonwealth was not stated; but whatever it was, it will have been diminished by the recent revolt within the Department of Social Security.  

**Government Regulation and Assistance Schemes**

The reduction in the Commonwealth's regulatory activities were as follows. The Prices Justification Tribunal has been abolished: presumably the need for justification of decisions by large corporations to increase their prices has passed. Another body has been created, though, to administer the Federal Government's policies in regard to the pricing of petroleum products. The activities of the Trade Practices Commission and of the Trade Practices Division of the Department of Business and Consumer Affairs are to be reduced, among them the investigation of complaints and the monitoring of safety standards. Ostensibly, the activities which are to be reduced are undertaken by instrumentalities of some State governments. The staffing of the Industries Assistance Commission (I.A.C.) is to be reduced, although this may only amount to some rationalisation given the existence of a corresponding division in the Department of Business and Consumer Affairs. Twenty-seven collections of statistics by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (A.B.S.) have been terminated although it would be surprising if some industries were not soon to argue that some of them should be re-established (for example, production of minerals and mineral products).

Investment and special depreciation allowances are to be reduced minimally (by 10%) as are the rate at which allowable capital expenditure incurred in the development of a mine or oil field can be deducted from assessable incomes and the rebate available to holders of shares in petroleum companies. The fate of the Export Expansion Grants Scheme is uncertain: it is to be reviewed. Certain forms of assistance for research and development and for productivity improvement are to be reduced.

**The Transfer of Functions to the Private Sector**

Eleven sets of Commonwealth assets were to be sold to the private sector. These include surplus land, property and storeholdings, four small enterprises within the A.C.T., the Bendigo Ordnance Factory and the Australian Government Clothing Factory which have already been advertised, the Wool Testing Authority, domestic airline terminals, the Housing Loans Insurance Corporation and the Experimental Building Station. It is not at all sure that, regardless of union threats, there will be any bids for the ordnance and clothing factories; the Wool Testing Authority is now not to be sold as a result of pressure by the wool industry; and the only likely contenders for the airline terminals are the domestic airlines themselves, which may have to be persuaded to do their duty. Additionally, parts of Telecom and Australia Post are to be sold or abolished and several "business authorities", such as Commonwealth Accommodation and Catering Services Ltd., will relinquish some of their activities to private contractors. However, these moves must be put into context.

As of May 5, 1980, there were 39 separate, national, incorporated "business authorities" owned by the Commonwealth. This total does not include 39 subsidiaries of several of the authorities and those authorities with jurisdiction only within the A.C.T. It does include six authorities of primary concern to Aborigines. Some of the very large public enterprises overlooked by the Razor Gang include the Overseas Telecommunications Commission, the Pipeline Authority, the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, the Australian Shipping Commission (except that the A.N.L. is to be "significantly deregulated"), and so on. In this context, it hardly appears that the Federal government's divestiture of some enterprises significantly
contributes to reducing the size of the public sector in favour of the private sector; and whether or not any of the public enterprises involved (except the Housing Loans Insurance Corporation) is actually sold is unlikely to be of any interest to any fraction of capital.

Substantial re-allocations of revenue to the private sector are occurring, however, beyond the divestiture of enterprises. These include the progressive increases in the funding of private secondary schools at the expense of state schools and the recently announced programme to augment the salaries of private doctors and funds available to private hospitals.

The Transfer of Functions

The decisions regarding transfers to the States involve a more interesting and complex story than do the other recommendations of the Razor Gang. The most notable transfer was of responsibility for the management of public hospitals. In effect, State governments will be required to finance a higher proportion of the costs of public hospital treatment if they are to avoid implementing the "user-pays" principle for services provided. In education the reduction of the activities of the Schools Commission and the abolition of the Curriculum Development Centre and of support for education research are all explained on the basis of allowing the States to set their own priorities. At the same time, however, the Federal government has intervened more directly in tertiary education by way of promoting amalgamations of particular Colleges of Advanced Education, obliging Murdoch University and the University of W.A. to collaborate, providing funds specifically for "effort" in the areas of technology and business studies, and determining that schools of engineering at two Victorian colleges and at Deakin University be closed.

Other transfers identified in the body of the report include urban public transport, soil conservation, adult migrant education, the Glebe Estate in Sydney, the regulation and control of nuclear activities and previous responsibilities in the areas of regional development, decentralisation, rural extension and the Ord River Irrigation Scheme. Transfers mentioned only in the appendix include legal aid, the school dental scheme and translation services. Certain specific functions are to be transferred from the Commonwealth to the Northern Territory Government.

The Report in Context

In the last set of Economic Notes, I put forward some reasons why large-scale capital might support moves to de-regulate the economy. The first of these is an awareness of the fiscal crisis of the state. Each fraction of capital could be expected, however, to have a different view of where the state's activities might most appropriately be reduced. The second reason is a concern to limit the development of any means other than conventional employment that could be capable of providing acceptable incomes, and hence to limit programmes of social welfare. It follows that the interests of corporations involved in, for example, construction associated with the provision of social services are likely to be more vulnerable than those of other corporations. The third reason is that any individual fraction of capital may believe that others are too highly protected by the state: many fractions of capital may fail to accept the generality of the need for protective regulation — that is, to accept that what is sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander. The fourth reason is that many regulations apply to the impact of corporations on their workers and the public, rather than on each other. Such regulations cover industrial safety, health, the protection of consumers and the protection of the...
physical environment. These are matters in regard to which it is possible to argue that self-regulation, or resort to agreed “good business practices”, is adequate. They are matters in regard to which it is possible to argue, in other words, that both some of the state’s expenditure in regulating, and some of the cost to capital in proving compliance with regulations, can be avoided without harm to the overall legitimacy of the conduct of private enterprise. The legitimacy of the conduct of private enterprise is perhaps hardest to establish among private enterprises themselves. Finally, most fractions of capital may believe that the functions which the state performs for them can be performed more efficiently.

The converse of the above is that large-scale capital can be expected to support only limited and selective de-regulation. The concerns expressed in recent times by two industry bodies, the Australian Industries Development Association (A.I.D.A.) and the Confederation of Australian Industry (C.A.I.) tend to bear this out.

The C.A.I. published in 1980 its first report on government regulation in Australia. That report is devoted to regulation by the Federal government. The C.A.I. defines regulation fairly narrowly: “Regulatory activity means actions taken by governments, whether under the authority of statute or as a result of administrative practice, which have the effect of controlling prices; entry into, or exit from, the market place; product standards and patterns of distribution and other significant aspects of economic activity in the market place”. On the basis of this definition, the C.A.I. identified thirty-one regulatory activities at Federal level, not counting those which apply to the A.C.T. specifically. According to the results of a survey the C.A.I. conducted, the major costs to capital of compliance with regulatory activities were associated with those activities within the domains of the Minister of Business and Consumer Affairs (41%), the Treasurer (23%) and the Minister for Primary Industry (17%). The preponderance of the domain of the Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs was associated with its including the I.A.C., the Prices Justification Tribunal and the Trade Practices Commission. The Treasurer’s domain notably includes the Foreign Investment Review Board some part of which was seen to be regulatory in function.

Although it is difficult to locate the C.A.I.’s sources of regulation within the Razor Gang’s tables of functions by department, it seems likely that no recommendations were made in regard to somewhat less than half of the C.A.I.’s list. (This statement excludes regulations pertinent only to the A.C.T.) However, what must be borne in mind in considering the comparison between the recommendations of the Razor Gang and the C.A.I.’s sources of regulation is that some regulatory activities are simply to be transferred to the States and, anyway, that the C.A.I. defined regulation very narrowly. That is not to say, of course, that in the final analysis there will not be a significant loosening of regulation in the important areas of the protection of consumers, workers and the environment.

From time to time, A.I.D.A. has paid lip-service to the idea of a generalised reduction of intervention. Its real concern has been, instead, to bring about reductions in particular interventions while ensuring that others, such as the tariff, are maintained and new forms of intervention are affected as they are required by the manufacturing sector in general. The first set of decisions listed under Government Regulation and Assistance Schemes in the previous section would have won A.I.D.A.’s approval; the second set would not have.

Not at all surprisingly, there are substantial forms of intervention by the state which are left unaffected by the Razor Gang’s recommendations. Reducing the activities of the I.A.C. only leaves the tariff itself more secure; and quota arrangements are not mentioned. The de-regulation of domestic airlines mooted before the report was published was quickly torpedoed by Sir Peter Abeles himself. The Federal government’s major intervention in the pricing of petroleum products may become more mysterious but is
Sure to persist: even the U.S. Administration is reported to be having disturbing second thoughts about its deregulation of the oil industry. Licensing arrangements such as for car rental at airports remain intact. The subsidisation of interest payments by the Australian Wheat Board is to be reduced but not abolished. While the Federal government is likely to adopt some of the recommendations by the Campbell Committee of Inquiry for de-regulation of the financial system, a new regulatory agency — The National Companies and Securities Commission — is about to come into operation. Most major forms of assistance to industries remain intact, although the “user pays” principle is to be adopted for some services previously provided free of charge.

Are we then to judge that the Razor Gang’s report is little more than an exercise in public relations? Or is there more to the report than strikes the eye — is there some sort of agenda hidden beyond the ostensible concerns of the report?

A Hidden Agenda?

It has been suggested that there is “a hidden agenda” of one sort or another behind the transfers of responsibilities to the States. One suggestion is that the transfers effectively move part of the burden of the fiscal crisis and of legitimisation to the States. A second suggestion is that the transfers to State governments, along with transfers to the private sector, are designed to deflate the people’s expectations of the state’s role in social welfare overall. Such a suggestion gives some meaning to otherwise unsatisfactory comments, that the Fraser government is mean, nasty and unenlightened. A third suggestion is that the Fraser government’s trumpeting its transfers of responsibilities to the States will make it more difficult for a future Labor government to centralise policy in any area. By the same token, the noise made by the Fraser government about the wisdom of transferring activities to the private sector, even though it transfers relatively little, may make it more difficult for a future Labor government to socialise the means of production — were a Labor government so inclined.

Reflecting on the possibility of a hidden agenda, I was prompted to look again at a report for the Trilateral Commission on the “governability of democracies”. The report bears the title The Crisis of Democracy. The Trilateral Commission was formed in 1973 at the instigation of David Rockefeller of Chase Manhattan; its membership includes the leading industrialists, bankers and politicians of the U.S., Europe and Japan. The authors of the report concluded for these men (and in 1975 the Membership of the Commission was almost exclusively male) that “the trilateral societies” are rapidly becoming ungovernable. “The incorporation of substantial elements of the population into the middle classes has escalated their expectations and aspirations, thereby causing a more intense reaction if these are not met in reality. Broadened political participation has increased the demands on government. Widespread material well-being has caused a substantial portion of the population, particularly among the young and the ‘intellectual’ professional classes, to adopt new life-styles and new social-political values.”

The authors specify a number of “dysfunctions of democracy”, among them (i) the delegitimisation of authority and (ii) an ‘overload’ on government and the imbalanced expansion of governmental activities. The blame for the “overload” is laid upon several factors, including “the involvement of an increasing proportion of the population in political activity” and “an increasing expectation on the part of groups that government has the responsibility to meet their needs....(and)....an escalation in what they conceive those needs to be”.

In essence the Fraser Government’s hidden agenda is just what the report to the Trilateral Commission suggests, namely to reduce the people’s expectations of the state and to re-assert the legitimacy of the market as an instrument of social control. The state would remain responsive to capital, of course, and the market would be under capital’s control.
FOOTNOTES

3. Warwick Richards has warned, however, that the Petroleum Products Pricing Authority may have neither sufficient resources nor directions to be effective. In Oil Pricing in Australia, June 1981, unpublished.
7. On the other hand, the federal government's failure to take up 100 percent of the ownership of the domestic satellite, in conjunction with the formation of a second common telecommunications carrier in the private sector does make a significant contribution.
8. What follows is an elaboration and expansion of what appeared in the Economic Notes in ALR No. 76.
10. Ibid, p.27.
14. Total industry assistance was estimated to be $824.6m during 1980-81, of which $200m was to be attributable to export expansion grants. (See Commonwealth of Australia, Budget Speech 1980-81.) This figure does not include assistance by way of tax concessions, which in 1978-79 amounted to something in excess of $766m. (See Commonwealth of Australia, Budget Speech 1979-80.)
15. Made by, among others, Ms Barbara Lepani of the NSW COSS (personal communication).

CORRECTION

In the preparation for publication of the article Stalinism or Independence a paragraph was accidentally dropped. This affects the meaning (See ALR No. 76).

The paragraph, which should come immediately after the quotation at the top of page 15, reads:

About three days before his final Central Committee meeting in 1956 Blake was called to a secretariat meeting and was informed that he was to be removed from any posts where his views could influence party members (in particular from Tribune, but even then not from peace activity or the peace movement).

The next paragraph begins: “Blake took the opportunity…”

ALR regrets this error.
NEW THEATRE FIFTY YEARS YOUNG
For almost fifty years Sydney audiences have supported a left wing theatre, New Theatre. Here Chris Williams talks with Secretary, Miriam Hampson and president, Marie Armstrong about this rich experience and they offer some conclusions.

The New Theatre constitution refers to "the progressive aspirations of the Australian people". Could you identify those aspirations?

MH: By that term, we mean the aspirations of people fighting against the use of nuclear weapons. We mean trade unions fighting for better standards of living. We mean people who take up women's issues, and anything else of great concern - everything, in short, that the ordinary person has to fight for. In particular, there's the big issue of what large monopolies are doing, not only in our country but throughout the world. They are buying our country for a song.

How would you define the New Theatre audience?

MA: The current audience, in my opinion, is more and more made up of people in the habit of theatre-going, young people, intellectuals. But on top of that, we've always retained a basic core of people that has been coming to New Theatre for years. A lot of these people would have come from what we used to define as the "working class" in the days when I first joined the theatre, and I think the sons and daughters of these people are coming now, too.

How would you describe working class culture today? At present, we are faced with the mass communication of TV, radio and Hollywood - mainly (for want of a better term) capitalist propaganda. How effectively can "working class culture" resist this?

MH: Our production of Yobbo Nowt, directed by Marie, was a good example of a play with a working class orientation. On various questions — the role of the family, the attitude of the husband, the way people fight to gain an understanding of their very low position with respect to money — Yobbo Nowt is a play for the moment, and I don't think you could beat it.

MA: I agree with that. We were very excited to get the rights to perform Yobbo Nowt, because it seemed to sum up everything we wanted to say at the time. It's very difficult for us to obtain the rights to plays we want, because we are no longer the only theatre that would touch this sort of material. By that I mean plays that reflect the lives of ordinary people, as opposed to plays concerned exclusively with intellectual and personal problems, dealt with on a level unrelated to the problems of the working class.

In Britain there is a strong movement in the direction of plays written for people living in industrial areas, instead of for the West End. America has a similar movement, but it's not as strong, from my reading, as it is in Britain. And many Australian playwrights are interested in work that says something sharper, and is not primarily aimed at middle-class audience. Steve J. Spears, for example. There are others....

MH: Nick Enright.

MA: Yes, Nick Enright — he says some very interesting things for a whole spectrum of people who are not quite the audience that David Williamson writes for.

Of course, it's terribly difficult to overcome the influence of television and other mass media, and the tastes being developed in the RSL clubs (particularly in NSW). We've got a
battle, but the playwrights are there. The big struggle is to reach people who don’t normally go to the theatre.

MH: There are people today who are very, very poor, and finding things much more difficult than they did a few years ago. So the need for our sort of theatre has become clear right through the theatre world (even if others do not emphasise left wing ideas as much as we would like them to).

How hard is it to maintain a left wing theatre, in the face of the current economic difficulties of our capitalist society?

MH: It’s been hard right from the beginning. You do it on the smell of an oily rag. Other theatres can pay thousands to mount a show, but we average $750 for each production. We bludge, we innovate, we do everything.

MA: We go to Reverse Garbage!

MH: We are a non-professional theatre, with only two paid workers (and they get a very ordinary wage). But because we are used to being without and having to fight, at the end of the year we will become one of the few groups in Australia that owns its own theatre outright. We have reached this position with a great deal of help from ordinary people, from some of the more militant trade unions, from government subsidy, and from some sections of big business.

In Germany between the wars, progressive theatres raised money by selling shares in a production to trade unions. Have you tried that sort of thing?

MH: No. We get block bookings from some trade unions, through left wing political parties, or from people who just like the theatre. Like all theatres we offer a concession for party bookings.

MA: Prior to Roosevelt’s election in America in the thirties, left wing theatre had extremely close ties with the trade unions. At that time, a trade union branch would take a block booking at whatever left wing theatre it was supporting. With a lot of ground-work, it should be possible for New Theatre to re-establish its contacts with the grass roots trade union audience it attracted in the 30’s.

It would be ideal if not only state or national trade union officials came to our shows — we would like an audience of 160 shop stewards from, say, the Metal Workers Union (AMWSU), who could spread the word on the shop floor. This is only a fantasy at present — I work for the AMWSU, and know the problems. But there’s a basis there we just have to find enough energy to go and speak to trade union branches, as we did in the past.

I think this is the sort of thing we should be doing to get these people to come and help us celebrate our fiftieth year.

MH: We still have support from the trade unions and left wing political parties. The Communist Party and socialist parties still come, as well as people from Direct Action. Once upon a time we would perform everywhere — the waterfront, for example. The wharfies used to have to line up for their pay, and we performed for them while they were lining up. We also used to go to Chullora railway workshops, but we need street theatre to do that. From time to time we have a strong street theatre, but at the moment, when we need it most, it’s as dead as a dodo.

MA: Once again, things like street theatre rely on the enthusiasm of groups of people, and we have a very high turnover. Any theatre has this problem. People don’t always get what they expect when they join a theatre, and there’s a lot of discipline and hard work involved in working for the New. There’s a lot of fun too, but we take our work seriously and expect total commitment. Some people think that’s great for a certain amount of time, but then other things interfere.

MH: Still, people in Australia have managed to keep a theatre like ours going non-stop for 49 years. We know a lot of inspiration came from overseas, but the New is really quite unique.

How important is the fact of New Theatre’s survival, in helping to forge a left wing or working class identity?

MH: Very important. It’s also important
that some of Australia's top theatre people have come from the New. A few old hands I've talked to can't believe that we're 50 years old, and that, years ago, they were associated with us. We have had an effect not only on actors but also on designers and writers.

MA: If any theatre was going to survive for 50 years, it's no accident that it turned out to be the New. Part of the reason is political. There was a principle involved in our formation, and we have tried to maintain that principle ever since. That's been with us all along — the fact that we've had these principles allied to plays that reflect the lives of ordinary people. This hasn't limited us. In fact, our principles have kept us removed from the sort of amateur theatre that becomes art for art's sake, and depends on the dominance of big personalities, our structure is very democratic.

Could you describe that structure?

MA: Members of New Theatre pay $15 plus $1 joining fee. The only job they have to do is take their share of front-of-house work.

The theatre is run by a management committee and a production committee, both elected at our annual general meeting. There are also quarterly general meetings at which committee members report back on activities they are responsible for (publicity, workshop productions, and so on). With this structure, people have recourse to areas where they can raise objections. They can raise them at general meetings, or talk to the artistic director.

Something like this happened while I was directing Yobbo Nowt. One actor who had never worked with me before didn't like what I was doing with him, so he went to the artistic director, which I thought was great. "Never had to complain", he said, "but I want to complain about Marie. I don't like this, this and this." The artistic director passed this onto me, and we were able to iron it out.

Sometimes this democratic way of work is a little heavy, and sometimes I would agree with anyone who says: "Oh, but it's stifling". It can be stifling but I think you have to pay some dues for having something that is run for everyone, and not just the flaring stars.

Do you try to develop any consistent production or acting method?

MA: This is difficult, We have our own directors on our production committee, but not enough to sustain the productions that we put on every year. So we invite outside directors, and we have people constantly ringing up and saying: "Look, I'm interested in doing a production for the New Theatre."

We give new directors a brief, but this only covers how the theatre operates, certainly not how we expect them to direct a play. Both internal and external directors have to discuss their casting suggestions with a production committee, but they have the final say on that — after all, the director's the one who has to work with the cast.

On the other hand, no director can work for us whose work isn't seen by representatives of our production committee. When we watch the work of a new director, we are interested in whether he/she has brought out the playwright's intentions. If a director doesn't have a current production we can go and see, we invite the director to do a workshop production with the theatre so we can observe the methods of work. The internal directors, to some degree or another, base their productions on Stanislavsky's methods.

In terms of production, our main influences come from Stanislavsky, and this is most apparent in the plays of the thirties that the theatre became extremely well known for.

I'm thinking of American plays like Clifford Odetts' Waiting for Lefty and Till the Day IDie. These plays came out of the Group Theatre in America, and it was totally influenced by Stanislavsky. Members of the Group Theatre like Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Stella Adler had gone to Moscow when Stanislavsky was still alive. As well as this, some members of the Moscow Art Theatre left the Soviet Union and went to America in the thirties and started to teach, so the influence spread.

One actor from the Group Theatre, whose
A scene from the New Theatre's 1967 production of *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude Van Itallie. The performers are Robert Bruning, Dora Hall and John Hargreaves.
name I think was Will Lee, visited Australia during the war as a serviceman, and took some classes at the New.

So you would say one couldn’t separate the beginnings of modern workers’ theatre from Stanislavsky.

MA: No, I don’t think so. Of course, I’m not saying there weren’t other European directors....

MH: Brecht, of course....

Brecht immediately comes to mind, because he criticised Stanislavsky for the naturalistic playing of the Moscow Art Theatre. Where would you place the New Theatre in this socialist realist-naturalist spectrum?

MH: At the time, when Brecht was criticising Stanislavsky, we didn’t know very much about Brecht. Although we were the first in Australia to do Brecht (a play called Senora Carrara’s Rifles about the war in Spain), we did it in our way then.

MA: Many years ago I saw a film of a stage production of Mother Courage, presented by the Berliner Ensemble with Helen Weigel as Mother Courage. You couldn’t help identifying with her performance, it was so fantastic, but we didn’t know whether we were seeing in her performance what Brecht talked and wrote about, or whether we were seeing it in some of the other actors that seemed to be acting in a different style. All we knew was that when we came out we were crying and laughing and doing all the things that you do when you’re affected by a production.

Turning to current issues, how would you see the role of an organisation like the New Theatre in supporting actions like the 35-hour week campaign?

MA: If we had a strong street theatre group, there would be no doubt that they would handle it. For example, the last active street theatre group did shows on the New South Wales transport system and on uranium. In this way, we’ve been able to cover current events quickly, and get relevant shows into demonstrations and factories, or wherever they may be needed. But to perform inside factories, you need people who are available during the day for lunch-hour performances.

MH: We can’t wave a wand and make people interested in street theatre. It will come again, but you’ve got to have people who know what they’re about.

MA: From time to time, of course, we try to do a revue on a current issue, but we can’t always get interested writers. Once again, you can’t tell writers what to write about. So it’s a long time since we’ve done a revue on one particular topic. The last one was It’s Time to Boil Billy, which we did just before the first Whitlam government was elected. We were very pleased about that, because we set out to get a show to support Whitlam. That doesn’t mean we didn’t have criticisms of the Labor Party. We felt that, politically, that was the most constructive thing we could do in that historical period, and it was a very successful revue.

At the time of the Viet Nam confrontation (before the Moratorium movement was the very big, broad movement that it became), the theatre realised that this was one of the most significant political things that we should be involved in, and we set out to get a show written. Luckily, we had a very talented writer in our midst, and other people who believed in it very, very much, and we got a show called On Stage Viet Nam which played to packed houses. The show performed a vital role, in that people who were already convinced that the war was something we had to protest against, were able to bring their uncommitted friends.

MH: We were one of the groups who really helped to bring about people’s desire to do something about stopping the war.

MA: These things have been highlights. We recognise them when they happen, and when they don’t happen we feel sad about it. For example, our revue late last year caused a great deal of controversy. Because I work for the AMWSU, and it was the very early days of the 35-hour week campaign, I kept bringing material on the 35-hour week to the writers.
However, these writers were unknown to me— I had seen their work, but as people I didn’t know them. All I knew was that if ever there was something we needed as a theme for this revue it was the 35 hours campaign. I knew that by the time the show got on the stage the issue would be hot.

The writer of the Viet Nam show had been part of us, but these two writers weren’t in that situation, and we ended up with a revue that was very controversial and put forward some very difficult points of view. We had to support it because we were responsible for the production, but I would have loved to see a show written about all the aspects of the 35-hour week campaign.

Now it didn’t happen then, but it happened with Billy and it happened with Viet Nam, and will happen again with something else.

MH: Of course, the very first revue we did was very important too. It was called I’d Rather be Left, and was staged during the time before the Soviet Union came into the war. The show was a counter to all the talk at the time about helping Hitler go into the Soviet Union, and had the same effect as On Stage Viet Nam. It raised all the political issues of the day, it was funny and beautifully done. But you’ve got to have the people to do it, as Marie said—you can’t wish it on people.

MA: If we were professional, we would commission things to fit in, but we are not professional, so we rely on the talents available at any given time.

How do you view the New Theatre’s role in the community?

MA: We cater for hundreds of people over a twelve month period. “Keeps them off the streets” we say “come in here and gain skills”. And in the process of gaining skills, people are occupying their leisure time, a significant factor if you’re talking about the effect on leisure time of the 35-hour week and new technology. We are not just another theatre. I think we are performing a very good community service. How many other places are there for people to come and be trained in their leisure time? We’ve supplied not only actors, but technical people that are now working at the Opera House and other places. These people started with us, and then discovered that there is a whole world of designing, lighting and sound. It’s a difficult area to get into professionally without experience, so we’re here all the time, offering training through workshops and major productions.

MH: We’re not trying to compete with professional companies — we couldn’t, anyway. It’s in America that most of these fantastic groups that started in the ’30’s were professional, but they didn’t last the length of time that we have, although they certainly had a tremendous impact on the capitalist world’s attitude to putting life on the stage, instead of bubbles and squeak and things.

There is also no doubt in my opinion that the New has had a great impact on other theatres.

MA: We did the Australian premieres of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible and All My Sons, although we were only a small amateur left wing theatre. The content of these plays was too left for Australia at that time, but it would be unheard of today for New Theatre to get an Arthur Miller play ahead of a professional company.

MH: To give you another example, we had the rights to Brecht’s Arturo Ui, and we wouldn’t do it at the time. It was such a magnificent play that we were waiting for all the things to gel (like the right director and the right people). We held onto it for about 18 months, and then we had to give up the rights to a professional company.

It’s important for big companies to do militant plays, because more people see them that way than they ever would here. That was the only thing that salved my feelings about losing Arturo Ui.

New Theatre is important for what it is and the way it’s run, even though sometimes we’re all very discontented with that. Over our proscenium arch in Melbourne and Sydney we used to have the slogan: “Art is a Weapon”. And that’s as true today as it ever was.
Gregor Cullen interviewed by Mike Donaldson
Gregor, I wonder if you could tell me about your work in Wollongong, and what's been going on there?

Last year, several people involved in political and cultural work, who were working as individuals, or with other groups in Sydney, came down to the Illawarra and started to produce cultural work with unemployed people, trade unionists and community activists.

Work developed around particular media fields: Bread and Circus in theatre; Steel City Pictures in film; Redback Graphix in visual arts. Redback Graphix, the project which I'm involved in, has been working with and assisting unions to visually communicate their policies, and the issues involved in particular disputes, to the broader public. The unions are beginning to see that through using strong visual presentation they are better able to take important issues to the public.

In August 1980, the three groups came together in a forum on "Work and Art" at the Wollongong Workers Club (organised by the Sydney Artworkers Union and Redback Graphix in Wollongong). This helped to bring us into contact with a number of people on the South Coast who had been involved in the labor movement over a long period. We realised there had been a history of political-cultural work in the district long before we arrived; that this sort of work had been produced around issues like the struggle for a shorter working week in the mines. The best feature of the forum was that it brought together activists who had done this sort of work in the past, and a new group of cultural workers. The work we are now doing in Wollongong had a history that we are now beginning to uncover.

The forum drove home to me, in a very powerful way, that culture wasn't only something that mystified day-to-day realities, but that there is a whole history of working class creative cultural activity.

On the South Coast, no specifically "Artistic Workers" groups — workers' photography, music, song-writing, etc. — have been established until recently, but workers' creativity in the district had been expressed in the past in the particular struggles about their working lives.

Fred Moore (a retired miner on the Coast) was using dramatic and effective forms of street theatre to put the miners' case long before the term "street theatre" was thought of. This history enables us to be seen, not just as "artists" working along isolated from trade unionists and older rank-and-file militants.

More practically, what sort of projects have you been involved in?

The first major intervention for us came with the bonus dispute in the BHP mines. We produced what was quite a simple poster for the mineworkers' Merger Committee. I think it went up in most of the pits on the Coast. This was our first clear indication to the labor movement that we wanted to work with trade unions in the field of visual art, to communicate issues that were facing working people on the South Coast. Posters seemed to be the most useful art form we could use for that situation.

Since the bonus campaign, we have been involved in the production of publications — pamphlets, and a multilingual rank-and-file newspaper. The best example of our recent work is the publication on the demise of the general cargo facilities at Port Kembla Harbor. We were approached by the Waterside Workers Federation to collaborate with a local research group, the Wollongong Workers Research Centre (WRC).

The Wollongong WRC produced a research document about what was happening with the bypassing of Port Kembla, and how that affected the jobs and futures of waterside workers. The issue also involved a consideration of the role of multinational and national capital. Our task was to take the Wollongong WRC report and, using our skills as visual artists, to produce a publication visually acceptable to a much broader range of people, creating community awareness about what is happening on the docks.

Through working on this publication, we wanted the labor movement to see that the
visual arts can have a much more active role; that art is not just a cultural commodity. We want to demonstrate that our work can be an important means of developing class consciousness.

From this account of your activities, there seems to be a difference in approach between what you're doing and what the Newcastle Workers' Cultural Action Group is attempting to do. They seem to be saying "We're workers, working in the culture industry and we want to make the products we create with our labor more accessible to working people". Now, what you're doing is rather different. You're not concerned with the question of the accessibility of "art", but with creating political art, propaganda. Newcastle seems to be more concerned with the question of who consumes art, you with the question of why it is produced in the first place.

Let me start by saying this: for us, the needs of an industrial community like the South Coast cannot be separated from on-the-job struggles for wages and safer working conditions; these struggles raise crucial issues that affect the whole community.

For example, the WWF publication *On the Bypassing of Port Kembla Harbor* in examining on-the-job issues raised broader questions concerning the regional economy, the environmental impact and long-term employment prospects in the district. Our own work and involvement is part of this strategy to develop a broader analysis of industrial issues.

But the point the Newcastle activists raise concerning accessibility is important as an alternative to commercial galleries and established theatres. Theatre like *Bread and Circus Theatre*’s production of *Down the Mine and Up the Spout Show* is in the form of popular restaurant theatre, but it raises political issues: the 35-hour week and automation in the mines. *Bread and Circus* have successfully adapted the theatre restaurant form and turned it into a propaganda tool, bringing to life old struggles that are relevant now.

The Newcastle cultural workers have also raised the important issue of the artist-as-worker. Cultural workers face many of the same issues that confront workers in other industries: unemployment, underemployment, lack of information on health and safety, corporate control of marketing and distribution, the problems faced with the new technology, and copyright laws.

Still central for Newcastle is the concern to give more access to culture as a form of recreation.

As for the real world of art marketing and economics, would you say that there is very little chance of a visual artist today even managing to get by, let alone obtain a reasonable income?

Since the mid-1970s, there has taken place a radicalisation of artworkers who have been concerned with raising questions, some of which are about working conditions and wages. As a result of the present economic crisis in art, marketing has shifted to more corporate sponsorship which supports a conservative, uncritical cultural product. The number of artists who are willing to produce cultural products which reflect corporate ideology is limited.

Cultural workers, through organisations such as the Artworkers Union, and community arts projects, are now demanding a more democratic distribution of state funding for cultural production. If this demand is successful, it will have a radicalising effect on the cultural industry, giving more opportunities for artists outside the "established elite" to find a viable political alternative to the present control of the commercial art market.

So you would see the main difference between your work and the work of bourgeois artists as being the content of your work? Do you see any difference in the style of your work as well? You are doing different things, for different reasons, for different people. Are you doing them in a different manner?

Style is determined, to some extent, by resources. Ours are very limited at the moment and this restricts the sort of work we
could do. I’m very interested in the work produced in Germany during the late 1920s and ‘30s, associated with John Heartfield and his use of political photo-montage. Our work as visual artists also involves crucial questions of multiculturalism. Wollongong has many migrant groups and this is a crucial element in developing visual representations that address a multicultural community.

In a regional industrial community such as the Illawarra, the labor movement has historically provided the structures for critical cultural activities to be supported in. It’s important not to get fixated with having to develop quasi-alternatives. May Day is a great opportunity to produce banners, large painter-type images around important issues which can be presented in their historical context.

Is there any important significance in the reasons for your returning to Wollongong?

Michael (Callaghan) and I grew up in Wollongong and went to Sydney to study sculpture and painting. Returning to the ‘gong to work as political-cultural activists was a major step in the development of our own political experience and understanding. Cultural skills tend to be centralised in major capitals due to many factors, some of these being cultural policy and capital. With the rebuilding of the workers’ movement, we saw that our skills could be best developed alongside the labor movement in this region.

Postscript

Early in 1981, grants were received from both the NSW state government and federal government cultural funds to further develop the role of the visual arts in the industrial community. Both Michael Callaghan and Gregor Cullen are employed under a 12-month artist-in-residence project to establish a silk screen printing workshop from which the Redback Graphix project will be based.

Redback Graphix will continue to develop a policy of decentralisation of cultural skills and encourage the visual arts to be seen as an important strategic resource for the labor movement, and not simply as a passive and recreational activity.
The Cultural Worker

There’s been considerable interest expressed among those working in the field of culture, in the Newcastle Workers’ Cultural Action Committee. Perhaps you could explain what it is and where it came from?

The Workers’ Cultural Action Committee (WCAC) is a subcommittee of Newcastle Trades Hall Council. It was set up in 1974 by people who were active in the cultural area as well as, at the same time, being active trade unionists. Bob Campbell, an official in the AMWSU was one of the originators — he’s an excellent folk musician. The brief of the WCAC has been to take multi-media cultural events to the workers, to try and counter the idea that there are special institutions and...
places of culture that people have to go to. One of the main objectives was to take cultural events to the workplace, and this emphasis continues. Initially the WCAC was not funded by the Australia Council, but for the last few years it has been funded by the Community Arts Board to the tune of about $3,000 a year. The Committee comprises about 12 people — active trade unionists and cultural workers. Some members are both artists and union officials. By having this combination of people on the committee we’re attempting to break down the divisions between industrial workers and cultural workers.

There is enough bourgeois culture around to satisfy the needs of the middle class; what we’re trying to do is to break through to another area altogether, without being patronising to workers. That’s why we need to have rank-and-file workers active on the Committee. Workers can articulate their own needs in ways that cultural workers cannot. A professional actor, for example, may not be in touch with what a steelworker or metalworker wants in his/her cultural life or leisure time.

The thrust of the Workers’ Cultural Action Committee is to take Art out of the closet and into the street, to make it accessible to working people.

Right. We’ve tried to stay clear of contemporary ruling class cultural activities and present workers with alternative, progressive cultural material, which at the same time is not strictly didactic but which draws on working class life. Ruling class ideology has dominated cultural life for a long, long time. It has swept aside and ignored almost completely working class cultural traditions, to such an extent that large numbers of workers themselves are out of touch with their own traditions. What we’re trying to do is bridge that gap.

What sorts of events have you put on and where?

We’ve put on a number of events in factories around Newcastle, through the trade unions; there’s no way it can be done apart from with the trade unions and shop committees. The management has to be approached too, and some of the areas that we haven’t been able to break through are places like, of course, the BHP. Part of the problem with the BHP is the problem of the Newcastle leadership of the FIA. For people like them, culture could be the name of a race horse. The AMWSU, on the other hand, is much better. They have something of a tradition of being involved in cultural events.

The events have been mainly lunch-time concerts, because the performances are very limited. For example, we only get half an hour. The strict limitations imposed by this form of event lead us to look to places like the Workers’ Club as a venue. Quite often we do the two things together — run a lunchtime concert, and tell the workers that an extended form of the same thing is on in the evening at the Workers’ Club. It works; large numbers who have seen it as a lunch-time performance have shown up for the full show.

As well as music, we have been involved quite extensively in theatre and in organising cultural events around May Day. We’ve had a May Day Art Exhibition for quite a few years now sponsored by the May Day Committee of Newcastle Trades Hall. We’re doing what we can to break down the more pernicious bourgeois aspects of such competitions. This year, we decided that we would not award prizes for the art exhibition — to attempt to get around this commodity view of art work. Instead we decided that the works would be viewed by Bernice Murphy from the contemporary arts section of the NSW Gallery and by the Secretary of Trades Hall Council to select prints that would be purchased by the Trades Hall itself. Previously prizes had been awarded by some big-wig in the Sydney art world. The Trades Hall is attempting to build its own collection which will have a broad theme, like the workplace, and we hope that once the collection is built up it can be exhibited in factories in conjunction with local artists who will be able to discuss the work with workers. The Trades Hall collection will be limited to the work of Hunter Valley artists.
The May Day songwriting competition has continued, and usually the songs submitted have a progressive content. The songs are performed at the May Day concert, and the winners are selected by a panel of people made up of workers and musicians. Last year we had 60 entries.

Has the Workers' Cultural Action Committee any direct links with the Hunter Social Research Collective? On the South Coast, cultural activists are closely involved with the Wollongong TransNational Cooperative; is the same true of Newcastle?

There is somewhat of an overlap in that some of the members of the WCAC are also members of The Hunter Social Research Cooperative. Certainly the WCAC uses the Research Co-operative and the Trade Union Research Centre for any background material that it needs, but there is no formal link.

You spoke earlier of the Workers' Cultural Action Committee bringing together industrial workers with cultural workers. Do you find that the idea that someone engaged in the arts is a worker has encountered much resistance?

Yes. The role of the cultural worker in Australia and even within the Left has been given pretty low priority. Within the Left, the industrial workers have had top priority. That the Left still does not recognise that someone who is involved in cultural work is a worker, can only be attributable to the fact that ruling class ideology, a central facet of which is to cut workers off from one another, has seeped into thinking on the Left as well. Even the Left has tended to see the cultural workers as little more than a hobbyist — somehow the work that a cultural worker does is not work. This is related to the suspicion of intellectuals which is widespread in the working class. A lot of theoretical and practical work needs to be done before this conflict, this unease within the Left between cultural workers and other workers, can be resolved.

Considerable debate about this has occurred within the Left over the last few years, but much more needs to be done. Cultural workers themselves are still fairly confused and are not sure the direction the debate will take. We'd like to see the Communist Party, for example, organising a national conference of cultural workers to develop a Left national cultural policy because it's been ignored for too long.

In a number of socialist countries this sort of debate has become old hat. When I was in Cuba, I talked to a number of cultural workers there and they had resolved these questions even before the Revolution. After the revolutionary seizure of power, they were able to put into practice almost immediately the programmes that they had developed in the preceding years.

Many Left cultural workers are themselves still trying to work through the current bourgeois ideology related to things like excessive individualism. The cult of the individual is the dominant strand of bourgeois ideology within artistic circles. A number of cultural workers are still fearful that if they become political activists, their role as an artist and their development and expression may somehow be hampered.

Do you think that cultural workers on the edge of politics are afraid that political involvement will demand stylistic conformity?

This debate certainly happened within the Communist Party itself, particularly for artists and writers who felt that they were being pushed along the path of social realism. There's a place for social realism, as there is a place for the multitude of other styles. There is no need to push a particular kind of style. Under socialism, all kinds of styles and expression are tolerated, or so I found in Cuba. There is no form of theatre for example, which is held up to be the exemplary. In Cuba the classics are performed, Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, but so is street theatre, circus, and highly experimental forms of new theatre. Some of the material is unashamedly didactic, but most of it is not. The whole range is tolerated.

While it is clearly and unambiguously the case that stylistic variation is tolerated, and even encouraged, it is also the case that the
cultural workers themselves want to perform material which they see as relevant to the contemporary economic and political situation. Even Greek tragedy is viewed from a socialist perspective by the performers.

How is it though, that in your own work in Newcastle, you’ve been attempting to present an alternative to high theatre, which you equate with bourgeois theatre, but in Cuba this theatre is somehow transformed and becomes legitimate? Why is Shakespeare performed in the Newcastle Town bourgeois, but in Havana it is socialist?

I think the problem begins with the make-up of audiences. In Australia, so many of the theatre classics are only seen by middle class people. Classic productions cost a lot of money to mount — the classics take the form of a particularly expensive commodity. This means high admission prices, and a restricted audience. Opera and ballet are good illustrations of this. There is no attempt in Australia to make those art forms more accessible. In Cuba, there is every attempt. Theatre in Cuba is very inexpensive and often free. As well, there are a large number of touring companies — theatre isn’t restricted to the metropoles.

Clearly, the concept you use of “cultural workers” has arisen out of your practice in the Workers’ Cultural Action Committee, and the fact that the Committee contains people who are both cultural workers and industrial workers. On this basis the Committee has proceeded into practical political work in a unified way, but has any more developed theoretical approach emerged at the same time?

Theoretically, things are still very fluid: a lot of input, but no hard and fast conclusions. I spoke before about petty bourgeois individualism and how this is manifest in an extreme form in cultural workers, but it is supported by fairly immense social isolation. This is related to the physically isolated nature of the production process itself — the fact is that many cultural workers work alone and in a real sense in competition. This isolation becomes even more pronounced for socialist cultural workers. They become totally cut off from the Art Establishment, but at the same time they remain isolated from the working class, the trade union movement and even from left-wing political parties. A lot of our discussions have centred around these problems and how to overcome them.

Laurel, you seem to be distressed that art is considered a commodity under capitalism, but at the same time you consider artists are workers. Isn’t that precisely what workers do under capitalism, produce commodities?

What is comes down to is the degree of control that the producer has over the commodity produced. Because of their industrial organisation, industrial workers in fact exercise a much greater degree of control than artists. What happens to the commodity is totally out of the artist’s control. It can soar in price, and usually the artist doesn’t benefit from that at all. Artists in Australia are starting to look at the question of copyright, and at the artist’s right to some remuneration at resale. They are also starting to challenge the hegemony of galleries.

This sense of total lack of control is related to the isolation I talked of above. Alienation is not just a trendy word for cultural workers; it’s rather acutely experienced. The solution to this problem of cultural workers is the same as that for other workers — workers’ control; we’ve got to start working out exactly what that means in the context of art work.

In performing arts, the problem is even more difficult. The commodity is ephemeral. But workers’ control is a useful concept to use in the context of the organisation of dramatic work. More and more people are calling into question the structure of theatre companies for example, and are criticising the hierarchical organisation of work within them and are forming collectives and co-operatives. The idea is to break down some of the role-rigidity, around positions such as “the director”, “the artistic director”, and to attack the whole notion of “the star” among actors; also to have the performers involved in the writing of material, particularly in determining its political content.
DIRTY DEEDS
AND DRUNKEN DICKS

He gave me a smile as thin as my motel mattress and said, "How are you?" I tensed, shifted my weight to my left buttock and said, "I'll ask the questions."

"Drink?" I considered the three quarts of Johnny Walker I'd just put away, the five bottles of Panadol and the fact that I hadn't slept for three weeks. I needed something to brace me.

He walked to a fridge that was the size of my living room and suddenly whipped round fast, like a middleweight. There was a flagon of riesling in his hand and his voice was deadly serious.

"Am I getting paid for this?" he asked.

Detective novels have a long association with the left. The communist politics of one of the big three writers from the U.S. West Coast, Dashiell Hammett, go some way towards explaining this, but the other two, Ross McDonald and Raymond Chandler also have significant followings.

In some ways they mark the dividing line between the old left and the new. They are stylised with an intricate plot in which the hero — lone wolf male private eye — encounters numerous characters and subplots, ingests massive quantities of booze, gets beaten up a couple of times, is hounded by both gangsters and cops and finally emerges with the plot solved, his virtue soiled but intact and the big wide world more or less unchanged.

The heroes are sexist loners and that's how the authors come across. The image of the man alone fighting an individual battle (both physical and intellectual) against the rest of

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Peter Corris' Cliff Hardy novels are The Dying Trade (McGraw Hill, 1980) and White Meat (Pan, 1981). A third Cliff Hardy novel The Marvellous Boy will be published by Pan in 1982. Corris has also written a history of Australian prize-fighting — Lords of the Ring (Cassell).
the world "for something a sucker like me calls ethics" has an obvious appeal for a movement with its back against the wall.

It’s a bit out of place in the eighties. One can’t see an unstructured collective working it out that Terry Lennox wasn’t really dead in "The Long Goodbye." And the sexual politics are very much on the nose.

Still, the clients are rich and powerful and tell lies, the politicians and cops are usually corrupt and such sympathetic characters as appear are usually cut off from the power and the money.

Now Australia has its own reproduction of a West Coast detective. Peter Corris has published the first of a series of books, written in the genre of Chandler etc. and set in Sydney. He was the literary editor of the National Times, squeezed between the wine pages and the Ferrari ads, and has several of my CPA comrades as his fans for a book on Australian prize fighting called Lords of the Ring.

There are plans for the new detective, Cliff Hardy, to break into the electronic media with ABC production of a series. (I hope they do a better job than a recent small screen version of James Garner playing Marlowe).

Searching for the politics of it all, I talked to Peter Corris at his home on the South Coast where he lives with the feminist writer Jean Bedford and their children. We only drank coffee and neither of us wore trench coats.

The Genre and some Mild Heresy ....

We started on the genre and its practitioners — the big three and how, after the passage of time, they rate as writers, and in comparison with each other. This is a bit like asking a Tolkien buff to describe Middle Earth, but Corris has enough humor to take the edge off his obvious passion for the form.

He says, "Well, the line of development is very clear. Hammett was writing, Chandler was looking round for something to do, Hammett saw what Chandler could do, thought he could do it better, but differently, and took it along from there. McDonald started very clearly as a conscious Chandler imitator. (The early McDonalds are very much closer to Chandler than the later ones.) Then McDonald got ideas of his own.

Dashiel Hammett has recently enjoyed a revival with the film Julia, which featured his companion Lillian Hellman, and the republishing of some of Hellman’s work in which he appears. He was jailed in the McCarthy period for his politics, but that doesn’t necessarily make him a good fiction writer.

I’d mentioned earlier that I’d been very disappointed with Hammett. His writing mostly bang-bang-bash-bash stuff reminded me of the Hank Jansens and Mickey Spilianes of adolescence and, given his political commitment, it was a shock to find that, in his writing, he was the least political of the three.

"Yes, that’s always struck me as curious that there’s a convention that Chandler is a bit soft, Hammett much tougher and, of course, much sounder. That might be true in their personal lives, though the whole story’s not told about that .... but I don’t think that Hammett’s class consciousness, political analysis or the rest show very much in his writing at all. And certainly not dramatically or effectively."

I say that it’s very unsatisfactory — and not a unique experience — to feel obliged to like the politically sound writer.

"I have that feeling, too. I went back to reading The Maltese Falcon again, just to sort of refresh at the well springs, and I stopped about half way through. I found it stilted and stiff, and really pretty dull."

Back to the genre, a tight format with rules
Corris has written non-fiction and short stories but these are the first novels. Does he feel constricted or happier?

"Very much happier. Like most people who actually get novels published, I've thrown unpublished ones away, historical novels, an attempt at a social novel, terrible failures. I find that when the ground rules are known, far from stiffening up the style, they make me feel more confident and I can get into the story. I can develop the character, I can get the thing moving much more easily than starting in an open situation."

Marxism vindicated.
Sexism put down ....

But he picked this genre rather than Mills and Boone romances or science fiction or whatever. Why?

"I think I just like it, but for particular reasons. I like reading and writing in the first person. It seems to me to be direct and easy to get into, both for writer and reader. That comes partly from Hemingway. I've always liked first person Hemingway. But other than that, it's a matter of a personal taste for action, wit, humor, accessible entertainment."

I mention marxism and the novel. That analysis which traces the move from the drama (primarily Elizabethan and after) to the novel as a move from a social form (pre-capitalist) to an individual form. Rather than a writer, director and players speaking to an audience, one writer speaks to one reader.

"I can understand that and I think it's true. A number of people such as Julian Simons and Stephen Knight, who are writing criticisms of detective fiction now, are right in saying that the private eye character is very much an alienated bourgeois individualist.

"I can see the truth of that, and maybe that could be a score against it if you're running a very class-conscious analysis of literature. But I don't think it needs to be because then it depends on what you do with it. And what you say, what is endorsed, not endorsed and so on. I think you can redeem the style, if you want to put it that way, by how you handle it."

And there are positive things about the way the genre handles it. I mention the war against generalised corruption .... the rich, corrupt clients. In Chandler there always seem to be one or two characters who are out of touch with the wealth and power and who are the only redeeming features in the plot. They are reasonably human and uncomplicated and tell the truth. There's a curious sort of left liberalism at work ....

I'd talked around and found a quote from Tom Uren about Peter Corris' work. How did he regard it? He says the quote is about something completely different. So much for my research.

So what about sexual politics? Not just of his work but of the genre. Does he feel constrained to enter into the sexual attitudes of the 'fifties, or does he locate himself in the 'eighties?

"The latter; I'm getting better at it, or at least I'm doing it more easily. I think this is one of the things that sticks out about Hammett. I mean, Chandler's sexist, very clearly, and Chandler's very worried about homosexuality, you can see the anxiety. But Hammett maintains straight-out male dominant characters all the way through.

"In the early draft of the first novel I stuck very closely to the Chandler form and a lot of the wisecracks were sexist and a lot of the description was sexist, and I revised this extensively and self-consciously, to tone down sexism but I suppose to leave ... a taste. I don't think you can get away from it completely but I'm trying to, as I go along.

For the third book, I've just done a fairly extensive rewrite. I really restructured it quite a lot with that as one of the things in mind. What actually happened, it seems to me, is that it turned out better, more dramatically
interesting, to build up a couple of the female characters and not make them doormats.

"I think it’s something in the background that’s shaping the writing. It’s a useful gestalt thing to be aware of, rather than a problem."

A Digression on Dogs ....

An issue I’d been longing to raise. It relates back to Chandler with the hero-as-pastoralist. The way he brings in the weather, the countryside where he travels. Corris doesn’t actually name the song-birds and flowers as Chandler did, but what is this macho-pastoral bit?

"I’m not sure about that. It’s partly convention, partly a version of punctuation, some thing you do to have a break between the action. Or it’s supposed to be (he grins) a sort of metaphor for ‘thought?’ When you’re soaked in the stuff, when you’re tapping it out, it comes into your head. Now it’s time to cast your eye about a bit.

"I haven’t quite done it properly; someone was telling me that I didn’t have any dogs barking where, in certain circumstances, there certainly would have been. Noises from dogs or crap on the pavement. So, to some extent, it’s just a convention or a metaphor, but I should be paying attention to the reality of it."

I mention that if he ever goes out letterboxing in an election campaign he’ll find out all about dogs. He grins again. He has a face which seems made for a sardonic leer, but it’s saved by a voice which carries a permanently gentle chuckle.

A complaint conceded ....

The first novel which features the character, Cliff Hardy, The Dying Trade, is out in hardback and the paperback will appear as soon as publisher’s marketing plans allow. More are coming, and it’s clear that they are developing all the time. But Corris can only be judged by what we’ve seen. What grated badly for me was one character, a black Pacific Islands woman revolutionary who is supposed to be in with the villains on a drug-smuggling racket. I said that, not only was this unrealistic, it wasn’t the sort of thing that one should be putting about.

"I think that’s a fair criticism. In fact, there are a few characters in that book that float around and aren’t really anchored. They’re off-stage people who help to move scenery around. I’ve had to read the book through for the paperback edition, and I find that character and the handling of her tasteless."

What can you say? We’re not in China, and that’s the closest I’ve heard a writer come to self-criticism of his own recent stuff. I say “Fair enough.”

The writer’s craft, sides flapping ....

He’s writing for television. Is it the same thing? Is this work going through some form of development too?

"Well, it’s certainly going through changes. Similar to the ones going on in the writing of novels. I’m finding it interesting to do and a bit of a struggle. There are different problems in writing short bursts of this stuff.

"The double plot is just about out for me. I can’t see how you could do it. So you substitute an ironical twist somehow for the double plot. Or some other kind of device.

"In writing the novels, I’m working with other problems; whether to make them more modern or not; how much contemporary political and social content to put in. So the novels are much more interesting."

He lived in San Francisco for a while, the capital city of the private-eye world. What parallels does he see with Sydney, where Cliff Hardy operates?

"The initial feelings are just impressionistic and superficial. Things about the city and the people in it. The geography. I really don’t know how the comparisons would run on their political histories or the sociology of both places. My guess would be that there are pretty good similarities."

How about things like corruption?

"Yes. Well, again, there are good parallels for that. Ross McDonald has said that he an
his story lines from trials, talking to coppers, reading the papers. That's the obvious and best way to do it. Though he doesn't really come out like the stuff you read, you just get a hint and a clue and then change it completely; turn the bottom on its head and leave the sides flapping. But there's got to be some kind of reality."

... And the politics

I wanted to get into the basis of the genre. The individual detective is always confronted by money of some sort, corruption of some sort. He proceeds through various adventures in which, if the cops aren't crooked, he's surprised. He gets beaten up by gangsters and there are always parallels to be drawn between the overtly criminal and the overtly respectable.

All these things are intrinsic. You never see Marlowe bad-mouthing some poor old widow who wants to find her long-lost son, only the rich. It's something which is not intrinsic in any other form of fiction. And when I read it there is a sort of "now". One knows there are people like that crawling around Vaucluse, Double Bay, Toorak ....

"Yes, I think so. In a way, I think what it's really about is people's anxiety, people's apprehensions of what is disorderly around them, what is out of phase and causing them distress.

"Detective stories are just a device for writing about social disorder and stress, and how individuals cope with them, or don't cope with them.

"You heighten this and dramatise it, but that's the thrust behind it. And it's why people are interested in it; they find something they can relate to. They can imagine people behaving like this. They've felt twinges of it themselves and they know it does happen."

There's a positive and a negative here, though not of the dialectical variety. The negative is that what's postulated is this lone wolf going out there and sorting them out which, translated into political terms, one can only see in terms of the bomb and bullet brigade — terrorists. A blind alley despite its increasing popularity among the talkers.

The positive side is that, at the end, there's never any illusion that there's been some dramatic change made. That the world is a better and safer place for what I've done, and all that. You know that the corruption will carry on and that there's a whole class of these people who are doing this sort of thing and will continue to do so.

(The interviewee is agreeing with all this, but I'm in full flight — like Don Lane on a bad night.)

So while the genre feeds off that feeling Corris talks about, it doesn't dispel the feeling, as purely adventurist writing will do. You don't come away feeling, "Ah, that's better".

"I hadn't thought of that. But, as you say it, I think it's right. Sherlock Holmes is much more prone to resolve. A Sherlock Holmes story will resolve the disorder. It will be put right."

And Agatha Christie?

"And Agatha Christie. Very much. The bad apple will be rooted out. Someone will suffer certainly, but things will then go on. Boy will marry girl, and the country estate will pass down .... "

To the rightful ....

"Owner. That's right.

"This kind of fiction is postulating a much more disorderly and unjust scene."

The questions were getting longer than the answers. It was time to stop. There is something very refreshing about a professional writer who is changing his ideas and is honest enough to say so; not to mention a genre writer who can look at his passion with a clear eye.

The misplaced quote from Tom Uren which I mentioned earlier was actually about Lords of the Ring. Tom said that Peter Corris' class politics shine through in his writing, whether he realises it or not.

The same will be increasingly true of the adventures of Cliff Hardy.
Political theatre in New Zealand is something of a no-no. The "regular" commercial theatre companies find that, on the whole, politics doesn't mix with business and that they must, after all, consider their business interests first. Independent (political) theatre troupes, on the other hand, are few and far between.

The best known and longest established of these is Red Mole which has gone through a number of — always interesting — permutations over the years. Its politics might be described as "poetic anarchism", though always with ideological eggshells of the New Zealand middle class still firmly attached to its bottom.

The most political troupe of recent years has been Maranga Mai (rise up) which last year drew on its head the wrath of many establishment groups, including the New Zealand government and sections of the press, allegedly for causing "racial disharmony". Most of the troupe's members are Maoris and have had a personal history of involvement in the Maori land rights struggle — the Maori land march of 1975, the Bastion Point occupation of 1977/78 — and their theatre is, therefore, more than a mere stage show. It is a crystallisation of their own experiences, of their own encounters with Pakeha, that is, white (in)justice, coupled with an historical awareness of the injustices perpetrated upon Maoridom.

What roused the authorities' ire most was Maranga Mai's audacity to perform on stage a court scene which, in its blatant disregard for the right of the Maori, forms a common and everyday experience within the Maori and Polynesian communities. In spite of its adverse publicity, the emergence of Maranga Mai must rank as one of the most significant developments in Maori/political theatre here.

An altogether different set of motivations led to the formation last year of an explicitly left-wing theatre troupe, Komikabaret, for which I have been chiefly responsible. The name, ostensibly, oscillates between the two programmatic points of being a "commie" and a "comic" troupe, based on the German "Kabarett"-format, i.e., a left-wing, satirical review of songs and "bits", clearly distinct from the cabaret-type of nightclub attraction ("tits and ass").

Stage work, like cartooning, reaps its rewards instantly; and I'm afraid that after a decade of journalism the researching and writing of newspaper articles had lost some of its glamour for me. I was keen to try new ways of putting my skills to use. I had begun, in 1979, to perform poetry (not my own) within a rock environment, with rewarding audience reactions from mostly younger people whose main interests were probably neither in poetry nor in politics.

Another quite political and fun-to-watch act has recently been added to this list by the combination of Slick Stage (an acting duo) and the Top Twins (a singing twosome) into the country's finest little touring company. Early in 1980 I gathered an impromptu group to perform a lengthy poem by Ernesto Cardenal, outlining the history of the Sandinista movement, for a Nicaragua
The cast of *Komikabaret*. The author, Tom Appleton, is second from the left.
solidarity evening. Again, the audience reaction was encouraging. I thought it might be worthwhile to try something like this on a larger scale, in a proper theatrical setting, and to form a real political theatre troupe for this purpose.

As I have always been partial to the writings of Bertolt Brecht, it seemed natural to try and put together a show of unusual Brecht material. My original idea was to grab as many political poems and songs as would fit and slap them on the stage as In Praise of Communism (which is the title of a well-known little poem of Brecht's). This was generally considered, by everyone I spoke to, as a "good joke". The consensus opinion was that nobody would come, except maybe a handful of communists.

Eventually, we found a title which, while more opaque, would retain enough bite and would set people wondering what it might all be about: If Sharks Were People (after one of Brecht's short parables).

However, performing Brecht who has been dead these 25 years, proved to be no easy matter. First, the government's art funding bodies showed no inclination to fund a commie theatre. This meant that we had to make do with our own money, and use as little of it as possible. Even so the production finally cost several hundred dollars.

Next, droves of hangers-on, attracted by some misperception which adheres to Brecht's name (chiefly on account of the frivolous whorehouse songs from his Threepenny Opera and suchlike) came and went from one rehearsal to the next. Worse, some stayed for a fair while and then left, making things unexpectedly difficult.

Copyright holders for Brecht's songs and poems, scattered all over the world, presumably felt that New Zealand audiences, consisting of penguins and bushmen, did not deserve to see a Brecht performance and so either did not reply or they replied by surface mail or they made difficult stipulations -- thus dragging a process, which should have taken only weeks, into months. Music for many songs could not be obtained. Many of the translations turned out to be way off beam, while many of Brecht's most political poems were not available in translation.

Finding a theatre for the performance became a nightmare, as did the rehearsals. Those people who stayed -- seven in all -- held down jobs during the day. Rehearsing on two evenings of the week and on every weekend for several months on end became a real drag.

At last, however, in November of last year, we performed our show in Wellington's off-off Bats Theatre, a musty little place perfectly suited for a production of Hamilton Deane's Dracula play. But while Sharks wasn't the greatest show on earth, we did manage to fill every seat in the house (and including the aisle) with it on every night we played.

We found that much of Brecht's purely political poetry was either too didactic or too heavy. We tried, therefore, to arrive at the political statements by degrees, and made an effort to squeeze as many laughs from the most unlikely lines as possible. We started with a new version of the familiar ballad of Mack the Knife and gradually worked our way to the end, a new version of the Solidarity Song. It was hoped that the audience would go through some sort of learning process in the course of it all.

Poetry, unlike a play, does not have a stage dimension scripted into it. It's thought to be self-sufficient. But we found that in translating a poem from the page onto the stage we could create something new that was "more" than the poem had been in itself.

For example: We turned the poem Please Doctor, I've missed my period (Ballad of Paragraph 218) into an insane oom-pah-pah song-number, make use of our own music and masks (as indeed we did a lot). The effect of a dervish-like dancing and swinging doctor telling a woman seeking an abortion that she'd "make a splendid little mummy-producing factory fodder from (her) tummy" is ghastly precisely because it is so awfully funny.

Similarly, we let a prissy matron in a vaguely Salvation Army-ish uniform narrate the story of Marie Farrar, a poor servant girl
who hid her pregnant state until she gave birth and then killed her baby. The brutality of the social conditions which created this situation was highlighted by a number of factors such as the distaste this character displayed for her subject or the cold blue stage lighting — all of them stage elements inserted into the text.

Some effects were completely “imposed” on the poems, such as when a rather upper-class lady reads out from a newspaper that “.... 300 coolies, who had been taken prisoner by the Chinese White Army and were supposed to be transported to Ping Chwen in open railway trucks, died of cold and hunger during the trip.” And then we let her giggle stupidly and repeat: “Ping Chwen!”

We spoke as a group the poem When the atrocities come like falling rain into a dark theatre, while slides projected on a white backdrop showed atrocities from Auschwitz, Vietnam, Soweto and other places of imperialist horror. Then, into complete darkness, over the deafening noise of “bombers” (three layers of different short wave static superimposed) we shouted a series of short poems from Brecht’s War primer: “General your tank is a powerful vehicle/it smashed down forests and crushed a hundred men/but it has one defect/it needs a driver.”

From design as much as necessity, we kept the entire stage bare. Clothed in black. All costumes (snatched from wardrobes and second-hand shops all over town) and props (ditto) and all make up was kept in black and white, as we wanted to achieve a completely two-dimensional effect, which would focus attention mainly on the words. We did introduce colour only in the lighting which served to increase rather than distract from the starkness of the effect.

In this fashion we were able to present Brecht’s poetry on stage as a stageable commodity in its own right. We were able to develop a workable “Kabarett”-format, and we found that there is an audience for explicitly left wing political theatre. For June/July of this year (when the Springboks come to New Zealand) Komikabaret will put on a show of South African freedom poetry. (Anyway, we’ll try).
Connie Field was a lot of other things before she became a film maker. In the Vietnam years she was involved in anti-war work, travelling with a theatre group, showing Felix Greene’s famous documentary, *Inside North Vietnam* and, at one time, helping out Chris Tillam, an Australian, when he made a film about her group (Narodiks). In Boston she worked on film distribution, joined the women’s movement, worked in the socialist feminist group, *Bread and Roses*, among other things. In time she became a mature age student in Women’s History. She says that her study and research kept turning her towards moving movies. Everything she studied seemed a good topic for a movie.

She sought jobs to give her technical knowledge and experience. In New York she worked as assistant and later as editor on various documentaries and dramas including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. In California she joined a collective which aimed to make dramatic and political films. The group, mainly men, worked in the industry, pooled their money, paid the collective members according to need and worked well until funding was available for their projects. At that point everyone wanted to direct.

It was while Connie was in this collective that she learnt of a Rosie the Riveter Reunion. The conference of 300 women was sponsored by “Jobs for Older Women”, later, “Displaced Homemakers”, organisations seeking retraining for women who had worked in industry in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s plus jobs for younger women in skilled trades. The existence of such organisations says a lot to Connie about how economic problems keep coming and going.

Connie Field’s film, *Rosie the Riveter*, is the second such film with that name. In 1943 a ‘B’ grade movie was produced. Connie learnt of the existence of the title song, featured in her film, only in 1976. She discovered many things in her painstaking and lengthy research. Having decided that in the story of Rosie there was an untapped source of information, which needed to be told for its own sake, and to illuminate present day problems, Connie Field went out to find her subject.

Through press releases in local newspapers she received more than 700 responses. With her associates she contacted them all by phone, made tapes of 250, videos of 40 and finally selected the five who appear on film.

The search for the Rosies centred on Los Angeles, Detroit, the San Francisco Bay Area and New York. Connie Field was looking for women who had worked in the aircraft industry, in the converted auto industry where tanks were produced, in the shipyards and munitions factories.

Popular mythology has it that women who worked in industry in wartime had not worked before. As patriots they took heavy and dirty jobs in wartime and gladly returned home when the war was over.

Connie Field believed that most women were already working well before the war. They worked because they had to, in unskilled, low paid jobs. They worked in the war industries because of the good pay and opportunities. Many became unionised. At war’s end they were less than happy when employment opportunities dried up and they were returned to traditional areas of female employment. Her research proved these points. She interweaves the stories of her five characters with official propaganda films of the period and with Time/Life Newsreels to make her points. The audience responds with laughter and derision as the points are
hammed home. It’s all fair enough, even better than that, but it leaves unanswered the fact that the men of the armed forces did return home to the jobs they had left. It certainly wasn’t fair to push the women out but no one at that time had an answer for orderly, sensible, post war work. The nearest we come to this in the film is a wistful comment from one woman who wishes that all the effort and elan of the times could be mobilised for peace and not war. Connie Field understood that she should choose characters with whom the audience would feel empathy but she was also conscious that they should construct the film, not impose propaganda on an audience. She chose her characters so that they could express many facets of women at work. One was a poor white Southern farm worker who crossed the country to find a job, others who are black had many experiences in seeking work and finding racism, long before World War II. They tell stories which are relevant today of the need for self esteem, of problems in finding dignity at work as well as decent pay. They talk of safety measures, union organising, action against racism, inadequate or nonexistent child care, the problem of the “double day” and the need to achieve some sharing of domestic work. Even while saying “I’m not a women’s libber” all the women reflect a consciousness of the modern women’s movement. Some recognise that they now think of their past experiences in a different and new way.

Meantime the film of the period expresses the myths. Connie Field says she wanted her film to be both political and entertaining. She also wanted to make a feminist film which does not attack women who feel threatened by what they understand of the women’s movement. And underlining everything is the idea that circumstances change but ruling ideology prevails. The fact that women did work in heavy industry and learnt skills quickly should have laid to rest the idea that some jobs are inappropriate for any women or that skills can only be acquired after a long apprenticeship. Yet the situation changed quite rapidly at the end of the war. Perhaps the most telling part of the official films of the time is the contrast between fostered attitudes to child care during the war and then in the early post war years. In the former period, children are depicted as well cared for in kindergarten, in the latter, children without a full time mum are depicted as deprived. Connie Field believes that you can only understand why so little changed if you understand that women were called to work in industry as part of the homefront, to back their men in the front line. Women, who have always been responsible for the homefront simply had that front enlarged, temporarily, during the war.

Of course the individual experiences of women changed them, as the conversations of the characters testify, but to change yourself is not to change society. These five women now go to some screenings of the film and speak with it. In many cases members of the audience testify. Contemporary issues are often discussed, not least the relationship between war and war preparations and the economy.

The years between the idea of Rosie and the film, which was completed in January 1981, were long and difficult, years of research and fund raising before a year of production and editing.

Connie Field wanted to shed some light on the hidden history of women and to communicate with people, especially working people. She says that there are many issues she was tempted to include but she decided to stick to her main point because she was not writing a political pamphlet.

The modern women’s movement has encouraged women to act, think, write, read, create and inspire. Connie Field’s movie is not the first feminist documentary and it won’t be the last but it is surely one of the most successful. It stands as a strong statement for equality and as such should have an important influence on the trade union movement. *Rosie the Riveter* will be released in Australia in August-September by LeClezio Films, 33 Riley St., Woolloomooloo.
Modernism revived, Realism reduced

Terry Smith discusses Humphrey McQueen’s book The Black Swan of Trespass.

Why should modern art be of interest to communists?

Because it is a major element of bourgeois ideology.

Because cultural practices under capitalism are sorted into a hierarchy in which the professional arts are the most celebrated, acting as the course of the unattainable cultural tokens of the rich (both as individuals and as a class). These professional arts also act as laboratories of new images, forms and ideas for the “lesser” productions of advertising and amateur art.

Because, despite these factors, some “popular cultural practices and artists (“modernist” as well as “realist”) can directly serve the political aims of communism and, it is often claimed, provide models of freedom (“unalienated labor”, for example).

In Chile in 1971 Michele Mattelart set out a project which she described thus:

The concept of modernity has assumed the role of an aegis, a watchword in the production of goods and signs in capitalist industrial society. A thorough inquiry into this concept may prove to be one of the more worthwhile ways of approaching the guiding principle of a system of social domination which justifies its dynamism and its notion of progress by repeating every day and ad nauseam the litany of constant improvement in unlimited consumption and technological happiness.

She went on to begin to characterise modernity as:

.... an ideology of constant movement and progression, daily regeneration and effervescent mutation, masking the permanence and static quality of the structures of the order which generated it. Our objective is to analyse the insistent modernity imposed upon us every day by society (advertising jingles, elegant fashions, new forms, artificial atmospheres, plastics, savoir-faire) as well as the ensemble of images, the spiritual and motivating dimensions which assure individual and collective response to a conception of development enclosed in its own determinism.1

“Modernity” is a key concept in imperialist domination of dependent countires. “The Modern” becomes the latest styling of that which the metropolitan economy produces for its privileged. It is exported as normality, upward valuation of the work of women artists, particularly those most active in the...
to dependent countries where it is attainable only by the compradores yet remains an aspiration for most. A political history of "modernity" in Australia has yet to be written.²

It would seem, then, that a study of modernism in relation to the visual arts would be of considerable political interest if it could respond to questions like these:

1. How did the ideology of modernity take shape in Australia in the context of our imperialist dependence, and what were the particular roles of the visual arts in this development?

2. How did modernism take shape within the relatively autonomous development of Australian art itself?

3. What were the resistances to capitalist modernity, and what forms should they take now? What is to be learnt from the progressive aspects of modernity and of artistic modernism? What has this inquiry to say to radical cultural work now?

4. Can a study of modernity and modernism throw any light on vexed issues such as the appropriate model for Australia's relationships to international capital?

The Black Swan of Trespass as its subtitle The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944, indicates, focuses on the second of these questions and deals partially and inadequately with the third. McQueen does not acknowledge the economic role of modernity — indeed, he curiously accepts the
"new world" implied by scientific progress, the discovery of the unconscious, the agitation of the working classes and the unfamiliarity of art. He explores the responses of artists to these factors, not their response to the reconstruction of work, "leisure", everyday life, the media and the state, affected by monopoly capital in different ways, at different times, in different places throughout the world. His method challenges standard histories of Australian art but, in the end, gives us lesser modernism than they provide. And, in the course of chasing this contracting subject, he deals drastically with both the Communist Party and socially committed artists. On first reading, one is dazzled by the frequent brilliance of the writing, the daring freshness of vision, the breathtaking insults. But, on reflection, the book seems to have so much reduced its subjects that it becomes a route from which one can only emerge puzzled, disappointed and sadly unconvinced.

These are serious reservations; they are based on a year's thinking with the book, teaching with it in a course on Australian art and (visual) culture, and discussing it often. I will try to indicate what the reservations are based on, beginning with the book's positive achievements.

McQueen's subject — why and how modernist painting emerged in Australia in the period before the mid-1940s — is of pivotal importance in grasping the history of our art. The conventional view, most influentially promulgated by Bernard Smith in his *Australian Painting 1788-1970* (Oxford U.P., 1971), is that modernism "arrived" here via reproductions, books and other information, and that it developed through phases roughly consonant with the successive phases of European modernism from Post-Impressionism onwards. McQueen ridicules this as a "station-master's log-book" approach to art's history and, quite properly, argues that modernism arose here primarily "from and through identifiably local conditions". He does not indicate the degree to which he would insist that this is also the case for other tendencies in Australian art, but the change of emphasis in this case is sure to lead to the question being asked in others, which is all to the good. Many people, including myself, have pushed explanations in terms of provincial dependence too far. (More accurately, we have pushed explanations appropriate for the period in which they were developed — that is, the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s — too far back into Australian art's history.)

McQueen's major methodological assumption — that modernism is not merely a style of painting but rather "a range of responses to a nexus of social-artistic-scientific problems" — is a novel attempt to break with the inadequacies of conventional art history and to locate artmaking as an ideological (material) practice. Specifying his "nexus" a little more closely, the key "social" problem becomes class struggle, the "scientific" ones are "the unconscious" and "space-time" (relativity), and the major "artistic" one is landscape. The relationships between these problems, and the artists' responses to them, are seen as constantly changing, producing "new movements, styles and subjects".

This approach generates some startlingly new perspectives. McQueen's unrivalled ability to lay bare the contours of petty bourgeois ideology is revealed in the passages on J.S. MacDonald, and Daryl, Lionel and Norman Lindsay. At the same time he shows how often they grasped the situation more clearly than their modernist opponents. Exchanges between painters and poets are explored more thoroughly than hitherto, although much remains to be done. Attention is called to the formative role of ideologues such as Sir Keith Murdoch. Relatively devalued styles such as surrealism are given due emphasis, as are artists such as Elioth Gruner, and lesser-known aspects of celebrated artists' work are highlighted (for example, the 1920s Flinders Ranges landscapes of Hans Heysen). McQueen's emphasis on Margaret Preston is both part of, and a stimulus to, the positive and growing upward valuation of the work of women artists, particularly those most active in the
1920s and 1930s.

Yet, despite these gains, the picture of Australian modernism with which we are left is not, in the end, a clear one. Indeed, we are left wondering why so much attention was devoted to what ultimately emerges as a relatively insignificant development.

Style terms in art history are notoriously opaque and misleading. Usually coined as rule-of-thumb descriptions, they gradually acquire a normative force — not only for historians, but for artists as well. "Modernism" has developed two usages. The general one begins as synonymous with "Modern Art", picking out the tendency to give visual form to "the experiences of modern life" (Baudelaire): That is, the urban, bohemian intelligentsia's responses to social changes effected by the (French) bourgeoisie through the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the century, the term gradually becomes more specific and two elements assume priority in the aesthetic ideologies and the work of modernist artists: personal expression and formal innovation. In this sense, the "isms" of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries appear as the "flowering" of modernism as a tendency.

The second, extremely nebulous usage is as a style term consonant with "Cubism" or "Fauvism", usually pointing to art which does not fit clearly into any of these terms but which is nonetheless abstract in form. Underlying this usage is the (now questioned) assumption that modern art moves increasingly, necessarily, towards ever-greater abstraction. In this latter sense, the term is used more often in cultural provinces than in the metropolitan centres. And, in both senses, it appears most often during periods when the tendency was perceived as in crisis, or as changing significantly: in the 1830/40s, the 1920s and the later 1960/70s.

Much would be gained by dropping the secondary usage altogether. But natural languages do not work so simply, given than one of their important jobs is to mark out "temporary" meanings with such "transposed" usages. This has been the case in Australia; two phases of the modernist tendency have been reduced to style terms: the 1910s, when local artists began to explore Post-Impressionist techniques, and the later 1920s/early 1930s when local artists began to adopt/develop late Cubist, Art Deco, geometric abstractionist styles. Usually, only these two developments are labelled "Modernist" in Australian art, the former is devalued in comparison with the "more advanced" (read: "up-to-date") latter, and a large range of artists who were clearly modernists are in the general sense outlined above are labelled with other style terms (e.g. surrealists, figurative expressionists, Angry Penguins, etc.). A central problem in McQueen's account is that he has fallen victim of this specialised (albeit confused) usage: his "nexus" approach is not applied to modernism as a tendency but to modernism as a style. The artists whose responses he characterises as "modernist" are only those already labelled as such by prior, narrow and questionable usage. He certainly treats other artists, and shows them responding to the same nexus, but they are said to respond differently. The result is a sense of analytical overkill, the emergence of one artist, Margaret Preston, as the only "real" modernist and, despite McQueen's acute criticisms, the values, priorities and basic organisation of previous accounts are perpetuated. We are still left with the impression that cultural struggles were fought out between two monolithic aesthetic ideologies: progressive modernism (a.k.a. Anti-Modernism or Nationalism).

There are other important methodological assumptions which prevent The Black Swan of Trespass from becoming a full and balanced treatment of its subject (although McQueen could reasonably claim that his intention was more polemical than this).

The shift of emphasis to the local origins of modernism has gone too far — relationships with European art and ideology are reduced to token connections.

Like most writers on art, McQueen does not have a developed sense of the competing visual cultures which are part of the ways ideological struggle is shaped in a society.
Visual cultures are produced and reproduced in and across different media, groups and class fractions. His respect for the autonomy of art is properly aimed against mechanical determinism (he rejects reflective theory in favor of a notion of "response"), but it is nearly total. The autonomy is relative, after all; high art is not entirely separated from other elements in he visual culture. Some specific confusions result.

McQueen mostly accepts, for example, the modernist dismissal of the "national school" of landscape painters (such as Arthur Streeton) as conservative. But recent research into the close relationship of the Heidelberg School artists to photography and to black and white newspaper and book illustrations, reinforced by studies such as Connell and Irving's *Class Structure in Australian History* (Longmans, 1980), has led to the perception that this school emerged as part of the populist hegemony of the mercantile bourgeoisie, setting up contexts for painting open to larger and broader audiences than hitherto acknowledged. The character of this populism in the 1920s and 1930s needs to be charted, but already new questions are being asked, such as: what were the relationships between Heidelberg School landscapes and the widely-disseminated images of World War I? Can we continue to dismiss the academic landscapists of the 1920s and 1930s as reactionaries and poor artists when we recognise that it was they who expressed a regionalist relationship to the land, a relationship which accounts for their huge popularity as shown in reproductions and imitations by amateur artists? McQueen is right to revalue Heysen and Gruner, but these questions should lead us to a revaluation of a great number of artists' work, and to seeing a strong populist imagery which was used as ideological material by different class fractions at different times. On this basis, we will be able to more clearly assess the conservative and/or progressive nature of the imagery.

Similarly, McQueen's stress on art's autonomy compromises his critique of the artists and writers associated with the Communist Party during the 1930s and 1940s. He fails to recognise that their paintings were part of a progressive tendency to work across a variety of media simultaneously. He thus devalues Counihan's contribution, and virtually ignores McClintock, Cant, Dalgarno, Maughan, Finey et al. (I will return to this treatment of this tendency later.) The same stress on high art limits severely his account of modernism: he ignores the great degree to which it was imported, and developed locally, in design, fashion, commercial art and architecture, often preceding developments in painting and certainly more widespread than them.

More generally, any treatment of modernism should deal with the prima facie relationship between it and the growth of monopoly capitalism. McQueen does so through his central notion of artists responding to a nexus of problems. But this fails to mark the class character of modernism: for despite all the refusals and counter-moves by particular artists, and the anachronistic tastes of some members of the bourgeoisie, modernism becomes the cultural style most favoured by the progressive sections of the European, then the United States bourgeoisie. And so it is in Australia. It is clear in the support given modernism by the Murdochs, Lloyd Jones, Horderns, et al, and in the class situations of nearly all of the modernist painters. But, as Bernard Smith points out in his review (*Meanjin* 4, 1979, 523, citing the work of Mary Eagle), it is clearest in the growth of retail trading and advertising, especially in Sydney, in the 1920s and 1930s.

The pages of *Art in Australia* and *The Home*, the windows of David Jones and Horderns, the society photography and the architectural magazines of the period are dominated by modernist imagery. This points to the economic base of Australian modernism, but a full consideration would locate its class character by pointing to the limited circulation of cultural media such as *The Home* and by contrasting its design forms with those of the bigger circulation *Women's Weekly*. 
A recognition of the class character of modernism is, I think, fundamental to McQueen's conception of modernism, but is curiously, not declared anywhere in the book. I think it is also present in his evaluation of Margaret Preston, to whom over a quarter of the book is devoted. I sense a rather simple equation: Preston as the single most progressive practitioner of the cultural style of the most progressive class fraction. Preston was, even in her own strongly stated terms, an artist of frequently variable achievement: the still-lifes, flower pieces and the self portrait of the late 1920s, and the landscapes of the early 1940s, are outstanding but much of the rest is not. There are, as well, some problems with both Preston's artistic program and McQueen's presentation of it. Without wishing to reduce to impossible crudity a lifelong struggle, the essence of Preston's program can be seen in her efforts to apply formal lessons learnt from studying European Late Cubism and Aboriginal art to Australian subjects (local flora, places) in order to create a truly national art. But we need only to ask whether any viewer would be likely to see her work as Australian if its subject matter were something other than distinctly local flora and places, to see that too great a claim is being made. McQueen too often mistakes intention for achievement and, more importantly, mistakes subject matter for content in his discussion of her work. For example, if we take the Prestons in the collection of the National Gallery (touring in the exhibition Aspects of Australian Art 1900-1940) we need only contrast the fine and subtle Banksia 1927 to the slack, coagulated Watermelon 1930 to make the point about variability of achievement, and to cite The Aeroplane woodcut, or contrast the two woodcuts Plaid Bow and Waratah, to demonstrate how much the claim for national content depends on her depiction of local subject matter.

Margaret Preston is singled out as the
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major — indeed, the only — modernist of the between-wars period. All the others are relegated to the lowly level of 'surface modernists', that is, artists whose only relationship to the tendency was at the superficial level of adopted style. This accurately characterises her position compared to that of Sydney modernists such as Fizelle, Balsoñ and, to a lesser extent, Crowley, but it is inaccurate in every other respect. Permitting only one 'real' modernist severely limits McQueen's thesis about modernism's emergence (as opposed to arrival) to a single case. Artists of equal, if not greater, interest than Preston are not given their due: Grace Cossington-Smith was technically just as daring, more consistent, and searched across a greater range of content — yet most critics, including McQueen, fail to go much past a reading of her style as retarded Post-Impressionism. The art of the Melbourne modernists is hardly mentioned, the significance of George Bell's teaching goes unnoticed.

It is here that McQueen's failure to question the received notions of modernism as a style leads to a glaring omission. A broad view of modernism as a tendency in Australian art must recognise that the "Angry Penguins" — Nolan, Tucker, Boyd, Perceval and so on — were extremely inventive modernists, responding to the problems which McQueen and others identify. These artists drew on stylistic sources similar to those usually labelled modernist (late Cubism, geometric abstraction). But they also responded to many other influences, particularly surrealism and expressionism, working them into a kind of abstract yet autobiographical image-making that was unique in art of the period. As Bernard Smith noted in the review cited above, expressionism seems non-existent as a category in McQueen's text. The ways in which these artists took the liberal option, and their art during the 1950s become locked into "signature" narrative series in bush settings (ideal ideological material for the industrial bourgeoisie), are issues beyond our present scope.

McQueen's treatment of the conservatives and the modernists appears extremely generous when placed against his dismissive condemnation of the social realists. Artists such as Noel Counihan and writers such as Bernard Smith are shown as incapable of going beyond the political limitations of the Communist Party — a party which had been 'born in a series of defeated strikes in the 1920s, grew up amongst the unemployed of the 1930s, and matured in time to help lead the war effort' (p. 75). The Party and the artists are seen as reformists because they failed to 'raise the alternative of public art' and because they were incapable of offering 'a vision of a radically transformed future'. Rather, they were tied to bourgeois forms such as novels and easel paintings, and to the depiction of 'work, privilege and suffering' in the past and present.

McQueen's concept of the media for public art is too narrow. There were very few murals by Party artists in the 1940s; most were done in the 1950s and 1960s (eg, in the Waterside Workers building by Rod Shaw and others, and in the Party's Day Street headquarters by Counihan). But cartoons, illustrations, photographs, layouts, banners, posters and floats are also forms of public art, and there were plenty of them, often done by people who were also painters. However, it would be unhistorical to imagine that it was a simple matter for artists to move suddenly and easily from specialisation in one medium to working across a range of media. As in Russia, easel painting was highly valued — even for artists such as Counihan who came to it after experience in other public media. But the point remains that this working across media was one of the important factors making the art of the social realists more socially relevant and progressive (in the circumstances) than that of the realist, modernist or "national school" artists.

McQueen's basic equation is that the work of the social realist artists and critics did not get beyond the limits which the Party reached in its work. A whiff of The Eighteenth Brumaire... despite the fact that Marx was
talking about the general relationship between a class and its political and literary representatives, where McQueen is referring to relations between the political and literary (artistic) representatives themselves. The implication as to class here is that the Party, the artists and the critics were petty bourgeois, assuming that the specific conditions of their emancipation were the general conditions for the salvation of modern society and the avoidance of class struggle. The equation is unhistorically neat: a reading of Harry Gould's pamphlet Art, Science and Communism (1946) Jack Beasley's reminiscences, Bernard Smith's recollections and the little research done on debates at the time indicate a searching for positions by both Party workers and artists, rather than a Zhdanovist fixity.

There are some odd aspects of Party-related social realism in the 1940s which demonstrate this. Counihan's best-known paintings, such as At the Start of the March 1932, were done in 1943 and 1944 — why such a retrospective vision? Smith's Place, Taste and Tradition of 1945 condemns most modernism as aestheticist, and celebrates realism as the present strength and future hope of Australian art, but it is also the first history to treat Australian art firmly in terms of European styles. Illustrations of Party newspapers and much of the Workers Art Club linocuts and woodblocks seem heavy with Socialist Realist imagery, especially the heroic male worker, yet they also look back to Expressionism and the Australian black and white tradition. Many strong realists, such as McClintock and Cant, were also expressionist surrealists at the same time. Why these apparent contradictions? There are personal reasons in each case, but they are not sufficient to account for a tendency. Awkward relationships to both political and aesthetic policies in the Party are part of the story (a story as yet untold) but pressures from modernist aesthetic ideology were just as important.

Counihan's flashbacks occur because of the importance he placed on the expression of personal experience (a key element of modernism, as we have seen). The 1943-4 paintings visualise aspects of working class life in the present through images of its experience of the Depression as witnessed by the artist. His use of colour is also modernist. Smith's writing of Australian art's history in European style terms follows from his acceptance of the other key emphasis of modernism, the stress on formal innovation. He defends internationalism in art against the chauvinism of the 'national school', but modernist internationalism is bourgeois, not proletarian — it is, again, not a matter of subject matter, but content. These are the sorts of questions which need to be asked when a full account is written.

McQueen finds the social realism of the Australian artists lacking in comparison to a kind of art which, he implies, was both possible and necessary: 'proletarian art'. This is not necessarily an art made, or even liked, by proletarians; rather, it 'points at relationships between past and future, oppression and liberation, Imperialism and socialism; it approaches fundamental truths about how the transitions from one to the other can be made' (p. 68). Unfortunately, it appears in his text as an abstract, reified object, with only Leger's and Rivera's names given as instances. It is just as distant as European modernism. It is so generally stated that almost no art could be read as qualifying, or a lot could — including, ironically, that of Noel Counihan (of the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s).

Although McQueen cites class struggle as the key social problem in the modernist nexus, the working class is given no form in the book, except as a trigger to conservative reaction. Working class cultures have no existence, so social realism's relationships to them are not explored. He comes close to Trotsky's early position: no revolutionary art until the Revolution, no proletarian culture or art at all, because the period of the dictatorship is a period of transition. Neither the Party nor the artists associated with it were progressive, so the only art that was, was modernism — actually, only Margaret...
Preston and some aspects of surrealism. There is one further sense in which this amounts to an inaccurately thin picture: it ignores the realism forced on a number of artists by their war experiences, and in their efforts to visualise startlingly different social relations. We need to look again at Dobell’s Night Loading at Perth and Knocking Off Time, Bankstown Airport, at Drysdale’s images of the rural proletariat, at Badham’s crowded interiors and Kilgour’s scenes of work and leisure. If in Place, Taste and Tradition, Bernard Smith tended to label as realists too many naturalist painters (outside the “national” landscapists, of course), McQueen goes too far in the other direction.

The real object of inquiry here is not modernism as a style but modernism as a visual cultural tendency in relation to other tendencies, such as regionalism and realism. It is both richer, and more problematic, than McQueen allows. It forces us to ask hard questions about image making under capitalism across the whole range of visual cultural practices, about image making within bourgeois ideology and against it.

notes


3 Irene Harris, graduate work, Department of Fine Arts, Sydney University.


5 These questions are being asked particularly by Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen in an essay forthcoming in Arena.


7 The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Moscow 1934, 40-1.


9 Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, 1924, introduction.
Here is a unique social document where Polish men and women speak for themselves about the great issues being faced in their country today. The voices are sometimes strident, sometimes cautious, and mostly optimistic. They offer different versions of events which have been in the headlines over the last year. Taken together, they express history in the making.

Denis Freney, who visited Poland in August 1981, interviewed this cross-section of Polish society.

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