TED HOPKINS is a poet with strong views about his work, art and culture and its relationship to the society which sets the context in which it is produced. LOUISE CONNER of Melbourne spoke with Ted recently about his ideas with particular attention to the National Gallery in Canberra which boasts a collection of his poetry which was presented to the gallery by the large corporate sponsors of cultural events, Phillip Morris.
The National Gallery seems to form a "Holy Trinity" with the High Court alongside, and the War Memorial across the lake. It is so isolated on the shore with its long ramps and no bus stops, nearby train services or walking promenades.

Both the High Court and the Gallery represent a process of sanctification. The High Court, for example, is so surprising. It's all so massive yet all it houses are a few small courts and a few chambers for judges to undress and dress up in. The National Gallery, of course, has a lot more substance but it still creates that sense of smallness, that feeling of the insignificance of the people who live nearby or visit it.

But inside the Gallery there's lots of corners that break down that external structure. Different levels are reached by ramps, so it's a little like an excursion tour. It adds to the feeling of the ascendancy and elevation of the works. You wander through observing the great works until you reach the top.

You mentioned that paintings were hung really high and that it gave you the impression that it was all about to ascend into heaven. Paintings are usually produced to be viewed at eye level, so does this mean that looking at the collection becomes almost an adoration?

Certainly. The whole gallery is about the sanctification of art. About one specific area of art which is "the canvas", "the masterpiece". It is an area of painting that was conservative and reactionary from the very first moments of royal patronage. Privileged people were able to pay skilled people to represent their lives in a glorified fashion. We still have a system of patronage and there is still that idea of the masterpiece.

We are always being told that there is something extra special about these great works; that one has to bend down in front of them; that they can never be touched; that millions of dollars must be spent to keep them in exactly the same state because at the moment they were painted they were inspired.

What will be the effect of a National Collection?

The National Gallery, I think, will take on a certain sort of art representation which will free the regional galleries for more interesting options. On the whole, it represents only one area of art — the painted piece and a few sculptured items.

A major factor in favour of a National Collection is that it is probably one of the only places in Australia for the documentation of art. And in some ways that is what I think it should be. Not so much the place to represent Australian culture with a monolithic gesture: "Australian Art is this".
Not many people in Australia have questioned grants and funding. We've had this idea that the arts need support from the government and that's true because the majority of artists don't have a market value. In that way, artists are the same as housewives—they work for no, or little, financial return to provide things that society thinks are valuable. But quite often all that a grant does is pay enough for you to buy canvas or get a book printed, but it still means you are working for nothing.

But what about the Australian section? Many people liked the Australian section, but one person complained that, once again, it was put at the top, that is, last. But the top floor where the Australian collection is housed is a lot more intimate. You're very close to the work because it gets narrower as you go round.

Is it better that you see overseas works before the Australian—does it place them in some international context?

I don't think it should be viewed that way. I don't like the way that you are guided around and not just let to pick up on what you like, when you like. But what I'm saying about the Australian collection is that it's more cohesive and more intimate in the way that it is displayed. It did seem to fly the gamut of developments of modern painting, including developments in Australia. So it is very important that you begin your journey through the gallery with these international paintings, because they are like the commandments. But there's no need to be in reverence of, say, an Andy Warhol.

So what you are looking at are the major movements in art and seeing Australians introduce their own sense of indigenous originality. It's not borrowed. That's what the gallery is telling you. But it's that structured way of looking at things that's the fault. It's OK if you want to look at things in an historical perspective, but really it's a misconception to look at art—or anything for that matter—with preconceived ideas. It's like thinking that I must approach you by first identifying your Australianism and then your communism. One confronts a person through a whole lot of diverse interactions. I think that's what a display of artworks should be too. If people could just fossick their way through in the way they want and make up their own minds.......

Can you explain the Phillip Morris Collection?

It's a collection of Australian art over the last ten years, paid for by the Phillip Morris Company. You see, patronage still exists. Instead of having royals and aristocrats we now have corporate entities with tax concessions to fund the arts. It is a great disappointment to realise that the future of the gallery depends on this idea of patronage. The arts and artists are there to serve their masters. The same thing is happening that has happened in sport.

People wanted to include a piece by BUGA-UP in the collection. It didn't get in and, of course, the speculation was rife that it wasn't included precisely because it was the Phillip Morris Collection.

The collection wasn't actually part of the opening exhibition, it was shown away from the gallery. It seems like the new chums have to put down a track record before they can get into the gallery. They're waiting for the opinion polls to ordain the work so that it can step up to the next grade.

But some of the best things being done in art are not in that area that is being patronised. The best records, for example, are coming out through small independent labels and a few of them filter through to the top.

But the art that you're talking about is almost "uncollectable". It is art that relies on the moment. It can't be collected and then represented to an audience that hasn't participated in its production.

I think it can. But what we have is a reactionary system of production and that extends to curators, as well; to their ability and knowledge to put things on display. If the reverence is for the masterpiece, then that's what people are spending millions on to purchase, trade and charge people to see. And the curators' training and attitudes are reinforced because that's where the employment is.

I think we can document and display lots of works but we've got to be a lot more inventive. My work, for instance, is useless as a display piece because it is a collection of poems in a teledex. If it is going to be displayed it should be on the front counter where people can really look through it.

Do the National Gallery and the Phillip Morris Collection do anything to reduce elitism in art?

No, the opposite. It is very much about producing elitism. But what it will do for many artists is to give them a little more leverage in demanding a greater share of grant budgets. They'll have a little more muscle to get grants and do what is traditional and obey the laws of patronage.