The Same But Different: explaining modern art
Peter Anderson

THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

Just weeks before the opening of the first exhibition at the Institute of Modern Art, artist and founding IMA Board member, Roy Churcher, was embroiled in a public controversy over one of his paintings. Churcher, had been awarded first prize in the Garden City Art Show sparking a negative reaction from the sponsors of the prize. In retrospect, it seems astounding that Churcher's work, "Painting", could cause the reaction that it did, with headlines in the *Courier Mail* declaring, "Winning art 'a shocker'" (*Courier Mail* 20 May 1975, p2), and "Public 'taken for a ride'" (*Courier Mail* 24 May 1975, p8). Just what was so controversial about this "abstracted, two-dimensional representation of a red table top in which a strong Matisseian influence was evident"? (Glenn Cooke *A Time Remembered: Art in Brisbane 1950 - 1975* Queensland Art Gallery 1995 p.92) According to the Garden City's promotional manager, "similar types of painting could be found in kindergarten painting classes", while the Secretary of the Macgregor Lions Club which had sponsored the prize, a Mr Gibbons, suggested that the public was being taken for an intellectual ride: "The idea of an art show is to encourage young and up coming painters. What kind of an example is this to hold up to them?" he said.

That a work with such an obvious debt to Mattisse could be so controversial seems almost quaint now, particularly when it is recalled that the major blockbuster touring Australia in 1975 was "Modern Masters: Manet to Mattisse". But "Modern Masters" didn't make it to Brisbane. At the time, the Queensland Art Gallery had only just reopened in cramped temporary quarters on the sixth floor of the MIM building in Ann Street, having closed at its Gregory Terrace site nearly a year earlier - while planning for the new South Bank building had begun, its opening in June 1982 was still some years away. Writing in *Art and Australia*, Pamela Bell described the gallery as "in a nineteenth-century ice age", with its collection "meanly displayed". And even with an expanding commercial gallery scene, and some support for established painters, she noted: "Of the younger artists the story is sadly different. There is not the stimulus or dialogue to encourage germination, let alone fertile growth". (Pamela Bell "Brisbane Scene" *Art and Australia* Vol.13 No.1 July-Sept 1975 pp46-47).

It was in this context that on the evening of Friday18 July 1975 the IMA first opened to the public at 24 Market Street with an exhibition of paintings by John Olsen . In retrospect, Olsen's work might not seem like the most challenging art of the time, although it certainly had been in the past. Back in mid-November 1961, the thirty-three year old Olsen's win in the QAG's H.C.Richards Prize had sparked a significant public controversy that had provided something of a rallying point for the newly established Queensland Branch of the Contemporary Art Society. While the CAS had ceased to operate in late 1973, the broad aims of the IMA were quite similar, and a number of the key figures involved in its establishment had been active CAS members.(see Helen Fridemanis *Artists and aspects of the Contemporary Art Society, Queensland Branch* Boolarong Publications 1991) In this context, Olsen actually seems a particularly

appropriate choice for a first exhibition.

At the time, Olsen's opening exhibition at the IMA might have been seen as a mark that things in Brisbane were moving on, that new approaches to art might provide the controversies of the future. Although, as the fuss over Churcher's recent prize winning work had demonstrated, anything "modern" - which usually meant "abstract" - still carried with it the a faint whiff of potential trouble. For example, the newspaper article reporting the opening of IMA began with the following sentence: "'Rubbish' 'farce', 'non-art' - these are some of the kinder comments levelled at contemporary artists". Although the article's headline carried a more positive ring: "They aim to explain modern art". (Ian Hatcher "They aim to explain modern art" *Courier Mail* 19 July 1975) Ironically, almost exactly twenty five years later it still seemed that modern art needed explaining, with an article under the title of "Shock Value: Politics of art", (Deborah Cassrels *Courier Mail* 22 July 2000 BAM pp.1&4), puzzling over the nature of contemporary art. However, in this recent newspaper beat-up it was John Olsen who was pressed into service as one of the primary voices *against* contemporary "post-modern" art, producing a strange reversal of the role he might have played exactly twenty-five years earlier. Olsen, the article reported, "believes there is no real intellectual or aesthetic discrimination in much contemporary work". "It ends up looking like a garbage tip'", he is quoted as saying.

IS THERE AN EXHIBITION ON HERE?

Significantly, one of the issues that seemed to drive the questioning of contemporary art in the "Shock Value" article is the status of exhibitions, or elements of them, as art. Where once the issue might have been the form or content of a painting, the problem now seems to involve disentangling the art from other things that might be found in the gallery. A recent IMA exhibition Andrew Arnaoutopoulos', "Trojan Horse" (which filled the gallery with a huge cube of boxes miming the shipping of classical Greek art to the British Museum), provided the journalist with an example: "The art-history student behind the entrance counter - where the sky-high stack stands - admits most viewers do not know it is an exhibition. Many simply see the boxes as evidence that the museum is in a state of disarray". The irony, of course, being that the IMA is not "a museum", although for this exhibition it might almost have been posing as a museum's shipping warehouse.

But, whatever the uncertainties generated by the nature of Arnaoutopolos' exhibition, audience confusion between art exhibitions and other things in the gallery is not a new problem for the IMA - it was there as a potential issue right from the start, a product of the many changes in art practice that had occurred during the preceding couple of decades, many of which have yet to filter down to a wide audience. Even after the IMA had been operating for five years, the cultural climate in Brisbane remained relatively untouched by these developments, so much so that John Nixon was prompted to make the following remark: "The commercial galleries and the state gallery mostly exhibit very conservative second rate art and so that's what Queensland people know art to be and expect art to be - that's why they come in here and say 'isn't there an exhibition on?'" ("1980: The Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane: and related cultural issues" - an interview

with John Nixon by Ted Riggs - *Art Network* No.2 Spring 1980 p.36) According to Nixon, it was 50's expressionism that continued to dominate art in Queensland - an issue taken up later in the decade in a series of exhibitions initiated by Peter Cripps (in particular, "Brisbane Hot" 1985 and "Past and Present" 1986).

If the IMA's first exhibition looked back - through Olsen - to an Australian debate about expressionism, figuration and abstraction, the IMA's second exhibition, new work by Robert MacPherson, began the process of looking at the limits of painting, and by extension, the limits of art. In a way, the IMA came into being to deal with just the sorts of problems MacPherson was engaging with, even if it might initially have seemed that what was really needed was a space to show bigger paintings. As MacPherson has commented, "I have some feeling of responsibility for the IMA. It was formed around works of mine that were seen by foundation members, Roy Churcher, Ray Hughes and Ian Still. These works were too large to exhibit in a commercial space ... At that time, in the mid-seventies, it was not possible to exhibit works like that in a commercial gallery in Brisbane". (Robert MacPherson in *Peter Cripps Interviews* IMA 1986 pp.7-8) So, right from the start, the IMA was understood as an alternative space - alternative to both the commercial gallery and the art museum - and it had a particular role to play as a space that was as much about investigating the nature of art, as the simple display of already existing art objects. Although, of course, it certainly has shown its fair share of work that might also sit comfortably in the museum or commercial gallery environment.

As John Buckley pointed out in 1978, "the basic models for the idea of the IMA - local problems and differences aside - are British Arts Council funded institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, or the Canada Council's 'parallel gallery system'". (*Art and Australia* Vol.15 No.4 June 1978 pp.374-375) And while the IMA did include the development of a collection in its original aims, the fact that this has never been attempted has meant that the main focus has always been on temporary exhibitions and similar projects focussed on "experimental" or "avant-garde" art. In this context, it is worth noting that while the IMA now sits within the national framework Contemporary Art Spaces, a semi-formal system did not begin to emerge from the broad mix of alternative spaces until the mid 1980s, in no small part as a result of the funding policies of the Australia Council. (see, for example, P. Anderson "The Politics of Space: From 'Alternative' Spaces to Artist Run Initiatives" *Art Monthly (Australia)* No.19 April 1989 pp.25-27) However, Buckley did identify links between the IMA and other new alternative galleries, like Melbourne's George Paton Gallery and the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in Adelaide, which had been established about a year earlier.

While the IMA's underlying approach sat a little to one side of the more conceptually driven EAF, Donald Brook's comments on the nature of that project, published in Art and Australia in early 1975, give some sense of the kind of art that was to be the focus of these sorts of spaces, and where such art might sit in relation to the rest of the artworld. "Experimental art can not be sharply defined, but it can often be recognised as that art which attracts the most reluctant support within well established cultural institutions. It is not found in museums, except in safe retrospect or by accident; it is seldom discovered in art dealers galleries except in emasculated forms, and it is only occasionally and, as it

were, to hedge a bet, that it is supported by the cultural policies of governments and institutions. Experimental art is not popular art; it is difficult or impossible to judge by established standards, and it is usually quite easy to deride as absurd or to condemn as arbitrary or irresponsible or even wicked". (Donald Brook "The Experimental Art Foundation" *Art and Australia* Vol.12 No.4 April - June 1975 p.378) Interestingly, we might note that these days one of the key criticisms levelled at contemporary art spaces - and the experimental art they exhibit - is that they are, more often than not, supported by direct government funding. (for example, the "Shock Value" article referred to above concludes with a quote from Olsen: "if it wasn't for government funding contemporary art would probably finish the day after tomorrow".) In this context, it is important to note that the IMA has received regular support from both the state and federal governments since the very beginning, and in fact, until the mid 1980s, Queensland's ultra-conservative government had contributed a majority of the organisation's annual funding (with very few overt strings attached).

A SHIFTING BALANCE OF TRADE

In its early years, the most important role played by the IMA was the introduction of new art and new ideas about art to a Brisbane audience - and in particular, to Brisbane artists. As John Buckley, put it: "At this early stage, foremost in terms of its priorities is quite simply to make sure that the best work comes to Brisbane - to the benefit of those who already have a healthy curiosity or a growing interest, but more importantly, to help prepare and seed the ground for a working base for the growth of contemporary art in the north".(*Art and Australia* Vol.15 No.4 June 1978 pp.374-375) The role of the IMA in bringing new art to Brisbane was one which tended to dominate through its first decade, with exhibitions by local artists being quite limited. In fact, there were perhaps as few as fifteen solo exhibitions by local artists during the IMA's first decade, about half-a-dozen of them by Robert MacPherson. Local group exhibitions were also few and far between, with the 1976 exhibition "Brisbane Painting Today" and 1983's open exhibition "No Names" being notable exceptions, along with "One Flat Exhibit" (1984), which marked the beginning of a dynamic relationship between the IMA and independent locally generated artist run space activity which has continued to the present. (The links between the IMA and earlier artist run projects, such as Q Space, are more complicated in that the IMA's director at the time, John Nixon, was the key player in both contexts.)

But the process of building a strong local base for contemporary practitioners was a difficult one. For although the IMA operated as an importer of art exhibitions, the Brisbane art environment continued to export emerging artists. As a piece of graffiti that once adorned the side to the Queensland Cultural Centre put it: "95% of artists leave Brisbane. Why don't you?" (see Barbara Campbell "Brisbane Scene" *Art and Australia* Vol.20 No.4 Winter 1983 p.464) Perhaps not surprisingly, the IMA's continuing focus on showing artists from interstate occasionally drew criticism from local emerging artists, and for a period of time some flippantly described the IMA as the Institute of Melbourne Art, perhaps partly in response to the links into the Melbourne scene provided by the IMA's directors across this period - John Nixon, Peter Cripps and Sue Cramer. Looking back through the listings of exhibitions throughout the eighties it is not clear that this was

an entirely accurate description. Certainly, during the latter half of the eighties there was a very significant increase in the number of local artists shown at the IMA, with both solo and group exhibitions drawing on an increasingly visible pool of practitioners - a result of both a significant level of artists run space activity, and a gradually expanding commercial scene (in particular the contemporary focus of the Milburn Gallery and Bellas Gallery, which both represented artists who also exhibited at the IMA). The founding of *Eyeline* magazine, which began publishing in 1987, also played a significant role in developing a sense of critical self-awareness for local artists, as well as lifting the profile of contemporary practitioners.

The turning point for the involvement of local artists as exhibitors at the IMA came in at the beginning of the nineties, with the first year of Nic Tsoutas' directorship including more solo exhibitions by Queensland artists than ever before. Tsoutas also took the step of expanding the available exhibition space by converting the Institute's office into a gallery - on at least one occasion, exhibition space was extended even further, with work shown in the goods lift at the very back of the building. Art was crammed in anywhere it would fit, and the number of ephemeral events taking place in the gallery seemed to increase sharply. Tsoutas also introduced an explicit focus on installation practice, with many artists modifying their practice for exhibitions at the IMA, and installation (or performance) frequently being seen as only mode of practice appropriate for this context. (As Michael Snelling remarked in his 1995 Director's Report in relation to the Nic Tsoutas initiated exhibition "Salon 3X6" held in June of that year: "Salon 3X6 featured an exhibition the like of which the IMA hadn't seen in a long time - paintings on the wall"!) It was at about this point that the IMA also clearly moved on from its original educational role. Rather than importing new contemporary art for a Brisbane art audience, it began to focus on developing a more dynamic relationship with local practitioners, developing a program - and individual exhibitions - that more clearly, and more regularly, placed them in the national and international context.

Of course, the IMA was not alone in making significant changes in direction at this time. The Queensland Art Gallery, for example, had shifted considerably from its earlier fairly disengaged position in relation to contemporary practice. Not only did it seem far more interested in the work of local contemporary artists, its long term commitment to the Asia-Pacific Triennial also had a very significant impact on the local art environment, effectively repositioning Brisbane within the national and international artworld. Changes in state government arts funding and policy also had an impact. For while the state had always provided support for the IMA, programs providing significant funding for individual artists were only developed in the early nineties, often providing local artists with the resources to generate new projects specifically for the IMA - for example, most of the recent IMA monographs have been funded in this way.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE GALLERY SPACE

While the IMA had always been more than just a gallery space, the buildings it occupied prior to its move into the Judith Wright Centre have always placed significant restrictions on what was possible. Certainly, none of the earlier spaces occupied by the IMA were ever particularly satisfactory, and each brought with it quite particular problems - not just lack of climate control, but leaking roofs. In addition, the 106 Edward Street site, occupied for over a decade from 1982, was awkwardly located with little public visibility and uninviting access via an ancient old lift that ground its way slowly and noisily to the fourth floor. The space itself was also quite small, with little room beyond the long narrow brick walled gallery.

Significantly, the move to the first Fortitude Valley location - on the corner of Ann and Gipps Streets in mid-1993 did not resolve these problems. Certainly, there was increased public visibility, with the building's signage now seen by thousands of passing motorists as they drove off the Storey Bridge, and visitors now able to walk into the gallery directly off the street. But the gallery spaces themselves still seemed unfinished, temporary, and it was far from clear that physical access to exhibitions necessarily extended to intellectual access. This issue seems to have become increasingly important over the last decade or so, with growing pressure for organisations such as the IMA to actively build new - larger - audiences.

The challenge generated by a higher visibility, and the IMA's continuing uncompromising approach to contemporary practice, seemed particularly apparent in the case of the opening exhibitions at this new site. For while the new work by Adam Boyd and Hany Armanious seemed absolutely appropriate selections for the particular moment in contemporary art practice - coinciding perfectly with the brief eruption of "grunge" on the Australian scene (see, for example, Jeff Gibson "Avant-grunge" *Art + Text* No.45 May 1993 pp.23 -25) - their positioning within the not quite fully renovated gallery spaces left quite a bit of room for a return of the well worn question: "is there an exhibition on here?" What exhibitions like these clearly demonstrated was the ability of the art to disappear into the uncertain fabric of the building. As Rex Butler described Armanious' "Soaked", it was "a collection of various odds and ends, some especially constructed for this and other shows (a pair of ski boots sunk in a thick paste of soap powder, three thick soled thongs) others incorporated fortuitously as the work was put together (some left over plumbing from the IMA's recent renovation)." (Rex Butler "Adam Boyd: IMA Brisbane" *Art + Text* No.46 September 1993 p.84) It was a complex mix of stuff theatricalised by its location in the gallery. But at this moment, the frame provided by the gallery, and the particular body of work in the space seemed almost to collapse in on one another, the gap between the art and the gallery was almost too narrow to see. For the uninitiated, how was this to emerge as art? Perhaps what was needed was another frame, another space, and the most perfect here is photographic documentation.

A little over ten years after the gallery’s move to Fortitude Valley, it celebrated its twenty fifth anniversary with an exhibition that looked back, rather than forward, though a selection of installation shots taken over many years by Richard Stringer. Strangely, it is

here in Richard Stringer's formal installation shots that the IMA appears to most clearly approximate the clean white cube, that space that had provided a focus for the development of modern art over the last half century or more. It is was also in this context that the whole history of the IMA became visible, or at least one history. For in these formal shots it was a history almost totally devoid of people, of artists, of viewers. Each photograph seemed precise, without uncertainty or confusion, constructing a visual seamlessness, a history that seemed almost to make of the IMA a single space, placing art into what might almost be read as an ideal gallery. What was played out in these careful installation shots is the idea of the gallery, an ideal that the IMA never seemed to have quite matched - perhaps has never really aimed to match. "The installation shot", as Brian O'Doherty has suggested, "is a metaphor for the gallery space". (Brian O'Doherty *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* Uni of California Press 1999 p.15)

In a way, O'Doherty's commentary on the gallery space, "Inside the White Cube" (first published as a sequence of essays in *Artforum* in 1976), might almost be seen to have set up issues for the IMA to investigate, not least the question of the future of the gallery itself, the gallery as a space that contemporary art both challenges, and yet needs as a unit of its own discourse. As O'Doherty puts it: "Genuine alternatives cannot come from within this space. Yet it is the not ignoble symbol for the preservation of what society finds obscure, unimportant, and useless. It has incubated radical ideas that would have abolished it. The gallery space is all we've got, and most art needs it". (O'Doherty pp.80-81) In this respect, it is perhaps ironic that while the IMA has engaged in many projects off-site, and in more ephemeral activities within its gallery spaces, the most comprehensive record we have is that which is most clearly constructed around the ideal of the very space we might wish to critique - the modernist white box.

In its present space within the Judith Wright Centre, the IMA has come to even more closely approximate this ideal space. And yet, perhaps in the present moment contemporary art is everywhere escaping the neat white box - sometimes, through the way it occupies that little black box of the screen, at other times by simply taking to the streets or other adjacent spaces. Of course, the IMA has always engaged with work that engages critically with the gallery space, or even rejects it altogether. But when we present the history of the IMA so often we fall back on the formality of the installation shot, on the documented exhibition (the IMA‘s first publication documenting its own history was illustrated almost exclusively by such images).

But isn’t there something lurking outside the frame of these photographs - another history? What happens to all those things when they are moved outside of this ideal space? Does the IMA only exist here, in these clean and carefully lit images of exhibitions? What resonates within these images is something else, something made all the more obvious by its absence - the bodies of viewers, their responses, their dialogue, and even their occasional confusion.

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