A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO UNAUSTRALIAN ART

First of all, let me thank you for allowing me to speak in my own language and not in yours – although I suspect that with a title like ‘Australian Culture Boom?’ I am mainly addressing my own country-people! At least, in some of the flyers I saw advertising this event there was the decency of a question mark after the word “boom”.

But what is really wrong with the title of this panel discussion is the assumption that this “boom” and “Australian” are somehow connected – that whatever prominence a small group of Australian artists has received recently is due to them being Australian or their work being seen as Australian. In fact, I would argue the opposite: that if some Australian artists, like actors or rock stars, have achieved success overseas, it is because they have finally learned to shut up about being Australian. (Although I might have to reconsider this after seeing the white pointer sharks at the entrance to last night’s exhibition – apart from being beaten to the punch in making such “Australian” art by Damien Hirst, do we truly think that we are going to be taken seriously if we so insist on exoticising ourselves?)

Indeed, I think that the success of a select number of Australian artists on the international scene – such people as Tracey Moffatt, Ricky Swallow, Rosemary Laing and Patricia Piccinini – has several valuable lessons for us, apart from the virtue of silence. And several valuable lessons for us art historians, who should always be trying to construct our histories as some way of trying to explain the present, of thinking how the art of today came to be. Put simply, what does the recent “boom” in Australian art, in which some artists have tasted international success, have to tell us about the history of Australian art? How are we to understand Australian art and culture on its basis?

In the 1980s, Australian artists launched a brilliant and witty meditation upon national identity. Given that (white) Australian culture had always been derivative and secondhand, had always imported overseas artistic trends (French, British, American), they reasoned, why not make something of this, why not say it is this that characterises Australian art and identity? Thus Australian artists like Imants Tillers – heard of him? No? I thought not – deliberately copied works from overseas, ingeniously arguing that their Australian content would lie not in any overt subject matter, but in the different context or reading they would receive in Australia. And though a subtle revenge, a subtle precession of the copy over the original, these artists were able to argue that all art was thereby Australian, that all cultures were derivative and second hand. Not surprisingly, the idea did not take off overseas. Artists – and, perhaps more importantly in this context, collectors – did not want to be told that they were unconsciously copying Australian art.

But Tillers’ arguments unleashed decisive consequences in Australian art history. Although his appropriations were originally directed against the previous tradition of Australian landscape painting – artists like Sidney Nolan and Fred Williams – we now understand this tradition in light of them, as already attempting to depict the void or emptiness of Australia, its non-place or non-culture (at least for white Australians). And, indeed, the whole of Australian art history has undergone a kind of revision or re-writing...
in the past twenty years, in which artists previously seen as proponents of empire and
nation are now promoted as post-modern ironists secretly debunking the very notion of
national identity (Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, the so-called Heidelberg School).

But for all of the intellectual virtuosity of these arguments – for all of the brilliance of the
paradox that the essence of Australian identity lies in the fact that it has no identity – the
actual art and culture produced in this way remains distinctively, indeed obsessively,
local. Its identity becomes the only thing the work can talk about, something of interest
(obviously) only to Australians, and increasingly less so it appears to a younger
generation of artists and critics. In fact, even in my arguments against it here mark me, I
suspect, as a critic of the older generation.

I recently had a kind of epiphany, however, that changed all of this, or at least allowed
me to think it another way. There was last year at my local State Art Gallery a show of a
fellow called John Peter Russell, a now relatively forgotten Australian artist who went to
Europe and stayed there. In the show there was a seascape he had painted of place on the
coast of Brittany called Belle-Île. By an amazing coincidence, another of the State
galleries in Australia holds one of Monet’s – admittedly minor – works of the same area.
And what I realised is that it looked just like Russell’s! Now, of course, it would have
been very tempting to think that here was an example of Australian post-modern
appropriation art, only occurring all the way back in the 1890s. But even more amazing
and inconceivable to me as a typical Australian critic was to think that – as was in fact the
case – Russell was actually there with Monet, painting next to him en plein air. In other
words, here was an Australian not exiled to the margins, as we had always been taught to
believe, but present at the time – a minor (but so were many Frenchmen) member of
Monet’s circle.

What this suggested to me, admittedly in an impossibly, utopian vein, was the possibility
of another history of Australian art, one not ceaselessly meditating on its distance from
the metropolitan centres, endlessly ironising its own insignificance, but attempting to the
best of its abilities to belong to a global culture. It would be an Australian art that was
precisely no longer Australian, but let us say UnAustralian.

And, seen from this perspective, any number of interesting and hitherto overlooked
Australian artists come into view: post-Pollock drip painters exhibiting in Europe in the
1950s; conceptualists in New York in the 1960s; members of Michel Seuphor’s group of
abstractionists in pre- and immediate post-War Paris. If you compare us to a country like
Brazil, we have not had our Matta or Niemeyer, but we are working on it.

The lesson here is not that there is a single global (read Euro-American) culture to which
all others must seek to belong. Rather, the problem is how to put together the singular and
the universal while avoiding the general. Art always comes out of a specific context, but
it is very rarely that of a country. Was there ever such a thing as French art, or was it only
ever Parisian art? Is there today such a thing as German art, or only the art of Berlin,
Düsseldorf, Cologne?
As a perfect example of this, take the greatest of all UnAustralian art – the art least concerned with national identity – which is currently sweeping the world but is shamefully unrepresented in this Fair and *Face Up*: Aboriginal art. Aboriginal art, I would say, is not Australian art, but instead comes from Papunya, Yuendumu, Utopia: small isolated settlements in the middle of the desert. And the enigma it poses for us – soon, undoubtedly, to be shared by the rest of the world – is how something so culturally specific, coming from a particular time and place, is able to communicate so widely? But this is always the enigma of authentic culture. That is, the true greatness of Aboriginal art is that it refuses to become either a national (Australian) or an international (Biennale, Art Fair) art. It instead takes the risk – and I am sure it is deliberate: the elders who make it insist again and again that they want to speak to everybody – of becoming a universal art.

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