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Flight from the Object: Donald Brook, Inhibodress and the Emergence of Post-Studio Art in Early 1970s Sydney

ABSTRACT

In the early 1970s, within the small art worlds of Melbourne and Sydney, the contributions of art theorist Donald Brook were as crucial to the innovation of Conceptual art as the art itself. He was an important, prescient but ultimately lonely participant in these developments, as were artists Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr, and alternative Sydney galleries Inhibodress and the University of Sydney workshop, Tin Sheds. Brook considered that national identity was irrelevant in art; was resolutely concerned with art but not at all concerned with “Australian art”. He was opposed to a methodology that excluded everything that did not fit into a preconceived and often teleological system, insisting that if a theory could not account for post-object art then the theory was flawed and not the art. While conceding that there may have been a basis for claims that post-object art was ‘simply not art’, he criticised conservatives for resisting post-object art, insisting that the issue was still to be argued.

Introduction

This essay examines the turn away from defensive nationalism to internationalist autobiography in the art and theories of contemporary art during the early 1970s. It is paradoxical that this turn occurred in the process of young artists’ disillusionment with an art movement that was the most truly globalised and the least tainted by nationalism or provincialism – Conceptual art. In the crucial years around the early 1970s, several groups of young artists abandoned or transformed the highly impersonal and daunting language of that movement – by then it was already part of an international mainstream – in favour of documenting the most personal and private activities possible. The most international of 1960s styles, abstract painting, had long been irrelevant as a cutting edge pursuit. Our point will be that writing on art was as significant as art itself in these innovations. Here, we argue that the contribution of art theorist Donald Brook was crucial. He was an important, prescient but ultimately lonely participant in these developments, as were artists Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr, and alternative Sydney galleries Inhibodress and the University of Sydney workshop, Tin Sheds. We have previously discussed the preoccupation with the idea of an Australian nation that increasingly underpinned Australian art and art writing during the 1950s and 1960s. Our argument was that a false consciousness of nation (which is to say that this Australia was reified and phantasmic, dependent on circular definitions of self) was central to the Australian intellectual and artistic context until exceptions began to emerge in the late 1960s. But even these exceptions were marked by Cold War neo-colonialism. In the early 1970s, within the small art worlds of Melbourne and Sydney, it was significant that a prominent, and indisputably talented, if pugnacious and irascible, art theorist should not only consider that national identity was irrelevant in art, but also that he would mount devastating arguments in support of his view. For Brook was, by then, a major contemporary theorist of art who was resolutely concerned with art but not at all concerned with “Australian art”.

The essential narrative in our earlier essay, revolved around the related response to two problems of which artists and critics were intensely conscious. How were artists to make and, just as important, sustain a cosmopolitan *and* critical praxis within the provincial institutions

and exhibition spaces of art in Australia? Could an Australian artist stretch, expand and re-define his or her identity, both literally and figuratively? The solution consisted of the redefinition of artistic work, so that record-keeping and resource-gathering obliterated the very conventional underpinning assumed as an essential element of art made in Australia: the idea of the self-expressive Australian artist. The short-lived but important Sydney artist-run gallery, Inhibodress, for example, was “founded without any interest in identity, or representing any school of art”.¹ The redefinition, closely shaped by the utopian and internationalist 1960s “end of art”, failed to create the praxis that Brook expected in his promotion of such art. The second redefinition, in essence a refusal, resulted in many artists’ cessation of art-making amidst the rhetoric of crisis and social activism. These refusals included Brook’s own detachment from substantive participation in contemporary art after this moment, as well as the medium and long-term exit of many artists, including Ian Milliss from participation in exhibitions or an artistic career.²

Donald Brook

The sophistication of Brook’s theories was almost unequalled in the history of Australian art critical writing. To account for this, it is first necessary to sketch in Brook’s biography, just as we have indicated the novelty of the context that he was entering. Brook was born in Leeds in 1927. He studied engineering before switching to fine arts. By 1954, he was working as a sculptor in London. Brook moved to the Australian National University in Canberra in 1962 to embark on a dissertation, ‘The Criticism of Sculpture’, to investigate the role of perception in the appraisal of sculpture. Although he held two one-man shows in Canberra and Sydney, he ultimately gave up sculpture to concentrate on writing, just as Bernard Smith and Robert Hughes renounced their tentative paintings for writing.³ In 1967, he was appointed as lecturer in sculpture at the Power Institute of Fine Arts at Sydney University. The teaching staff of the newly established Power Institute now had three permanent members: Professor Bernard Smith, Director, who taught the history of painting; David Saunders, who taught the history of architecture; and Brook, who taught the history of sculpture. Brook was to be continually embroiled in University of Sydney departmental and art establishment politics, as he would be from 1974 onwards at Flinders University in South Australia.

By 1967, Fairfax Press editor John Pringle, who had made Brook the *Canberra Times*’ art critic, was now the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Pringle appointed Brook to replace Wallace Thornton as the *SMH* art critic from the beginning of 1968, as part of his strategy to give the newspaper a sharper intellectual edge. In his inaugural 1968 article, ‘The Role of the Art Critic’, Brook addressed the issues that were to dominate his writing. He declared, ‘Art is

¹ Hall, 1970.

² Brook, 2005. He continued to publish in academic journals but in areas not directly related to contemporary art; see Brook, 2002b; Brook, 2004; Brook, 2005b.

³ Scarlett, 1980. Brook held two one-man exhibitions in Australia: ‘Serious Games in Relief’ at the Nundah Gallery, Canberra, 26 May–7 June, 1966, and later at Gallery A, Sydney, reviewed by Elwyn Lynn (*The Australian*, 25 June, 1966); Brook’s second one man exhibition in Australia was ‘Postures and Predicaments’, at Gallery A in Melbourne and Sydney, reviewed by Patrick McCaughey (*The Age*, 22 March, 1967) and Ronald Millar (*The Australian*, 1 April 1967). Brook said (1966), ‘I am one of the post-war generation of literary humanists’, and later (1989), ‘It was generally considered that I was too figurative to be semi-Abstract and not figurative enough to be Traditional’ (Brook, 1989.)

an uncommonly rewarding thing and it requires some imaginative and intellectual effort', so 'muddle and obscurantism in art talk', he wrote, was failure. He concluded that it would be a 'privilege to participate in the creative and intellectual ferment of the arts today'.⁴ It was not necessary for Brook to say that he found the ferment challenging and exciting, as he obviously did. He was also prepared to contribute to the ferment.

Even in the midst of this excitement, and despite his stated Marxist sympathies, Brook had surprisingly little patience with Cold War ideological and theoretical predispositions.⁵ He was fully aware of the Australian artistic battles surrounding nationalism versus internationalism, and figuration versus abstraction, so evident in the *Antipodean Manifesto* and its associated furore, but he simply did not consider that they were relevant to art criticism. In 'The Role of the Art Critic', he referred to arguments about local identity as examples of 'muddle and obscurantism in art talk'. He unexpectedly bracketed such talk with the earlier inter-war nationalism of J.S MacDonald, Lionel Lindsay and others who had asserted that "blood and soil" were the only true sources of national culture.⁶ The art that he regarded as important was difficult, challenging, marginal and definitely not insular. To ensure its survival, he would actively support new artists in print and by organising studio and workshop spaces, such as the Tin Sheds at the University of Sydney in the late 1960s and, later, quasi-laboratory spaces such as the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide in 1974. Brook was developing a theoretical framework that engaged positively with Australian and international contemporary art but which was marked by the determined absence of the atavistic preoccupation with national identity that had so disfigured Australian art and its theory.

Brook's sceptical thinking was always going to be at odds with Smith's notion of the 'living and shaping hand' of the art historian.⁷ In 'Is There a New Art?', an issue of the *Current Affairs Bulletin*, he addressed the issue of 'muddle in art talk' and in the process had some significant things to say about art historians, Australian art and the *Antipodean Manifesto*.⁸ Brook's proposition was that a radically new art might be emerging, but the situation was so confused that it was difficult to tell whether this was really a new art or just 'novelty art', the hostile term American critic Clement Greenberg used to describe American minimalism and Pop. The reason for the confusion was, Brook said, the tangled battlefield of figurative versus non-figurative, regionalist versus international, and ultimately the viability of the expression theory of art. Brook turned to recent Australian art history to make his argument, referring specifically to *The Antipodean Manifesto* and a 1968 essay by Laurie Thomas, the Arts Editor of *The Australian*, which followed Smith's lead.⁹ *The Antipodean Manifesto* had assumed, as we discussed earlier, that the divisions between figuration versus non-figuration, and regionalism versus internationalism, were significant issues. Brook argued that critics were wrong to allow redundant theories and battles such as these to shape their assessment of the new art that they were now encountering.

⁴ Brook, 1968, p. 16.

⁵ Brook, 2005.

⁶ Brook, 1968, p. 16.

⁷ Brook, 1969c, p. 32; Smith, 1964, p. 49.

⁸ Brook, 1969a.

⁹ Thomas, 1968, p. 6.

Brook set about dismantling the argument presented in the Manifesto, while declaring that it was much too late to participate in its fake controversies. He began by noting that the Manifesto had polarised debate about Australian art along the 'axis of abstraction'. According to the Manifesto, abstraction was associated with an undesirable international influence as well as a soulless lack of expression. Brook pointed to the atavism that allowed the identification of foreignness with non-figuration: set against an emerging regional cultural identity that did not seek to create a national style was Smith's obligation that contemporary art find its source in society's myths.

Regionalism and nationalism were not highly valued concepts in Brook's world-view. He had lived and taught in Nigeria from 1956 to 1958 before arriving in Australia, and so had first-hand experience of colonialism, post-colonialism and provincialism both in Nigeria and Australia, which is to say in both colonial and settler cultures. In a highly significant quote, he was cited in 1959 saying that Nigerian artists should have the opportunity to see the work of their colleagues throughout the world but that their aims and ideals must be their own, for 'traditions live by change and die by imitation'.¹⁰ He obviously still held this view in the 1960s and 1970s, when he was writing on Australian art. In 'Is There a New Art?' he took Thomas' 1968 essay, 'Academics of the Avant-Garde', to argue that the local issue of identity was not yet dead. He noted that the shift of metropolitan taste-making power from Europe to America had merely intensified the 1950s Australian resentment of cultural provincialism, a key aspect of Cold War culture, but that young artists in the late 1960s were nevertheless now happy to look both to Europe and America.

Brook made the point that American artists had needed to break free from Europe. This had been achieved by the American Action Painters – the Abstract Expressionists whose success resulted in a transfer of cultural capital from Europe to America, a triumphant Cold War shift that exacerbated the long-running Australian resentment of American cultural imperialism. By the end of the 1960s, however, younger Australian artists were travelling at least as eagerly to the US as they did to Europe. American cultural imperialism was not the same problem for that generation of Australian artists as it had for the previous, more defensive, World War Two-shaped generation. Thomas' essay had argued that the 'largeness of spirit' of Australian artists should be expressed in their own ways and not according to 'somebody else's artistic conventions'.¹¹ This was not a call to ban outside influences and return to the bad old days of isolation, Thomas insisted. Ultimately, he hoped, 'the only artists of consequence are the ones who have searched inside their own guts until they've found their own formal requirements.'¹² Brook archly pointed out that this simply paralleled the argument of *The Antipodean Manifesto*, amounting to a weaker call for the expression of a type of local identity. He concluded that this was another example of illogical, deformed arguments:

It seems likely that Mr Thomas, like the Antipodeans, has not distinguished clearly enough between the sense in which the expression of a place by an artist is inevitable and

¹⁰ Donald Brook quoted in *West African Review*, 1959, p. 466, re-quoted in Scarlett, 1980, p. 87.

¹¹ Thomas, 1968, p. 6.

¹² Thomas, 1968, p. 6.

involuntary—like the relation between symptom and disease — and the sense in which it is deliberately chosen and carried through — like a New Year’s resolution.¹³

Brook was thus recognising that no artist is free of local influence, but insisting that the artist may or may not choose to express locality or the identity of birth in his work. More importantly, the degree to which locality and place are expressed in an artwork is not a measure of its worth. His view was vastly different from that of Smith, and earlier proponents of an Australian School of art, who were constantly looking for a national narrative that could be classified as distinctively Australian, and for whom the manifestation of place in art, whether through atavistic racialism or, in Smith’s case, through the Left’s Cold War trauma, were part of the wider postcolonial search for an Australian identity, one irrevocably marked by post-war history.¹⁴

Brook’s argument in ‘Is There a New Art?’ was that expression theory – his words – had become less important to artists and that a non-expressive *figurative* art was emerging.¹⁵ He took Yves Klein’s *Relief Portrait of Arman*, 1962, as the example, pointing out that although the work is figurative it gives absolutely no clue to the feelings of the subject or the artist, and communicates no interiority. Brook noted that this type of figuration was appearing more tentatively in Australia than elsewhere in the world, suggesting that this may be explained by “remnants of the habit of cultural dependence” in Australia, or a lack of confidence in a situation where international standards were still set overseas.¹⁶ In other words, the trend was not well enough established to attract Australian followers. But he also suggested that young artists would not risk a return to figuration in Australian art if it was likely to be misconstrued as a return to Antipodeanism. They preferred to be seen, he stated, as influenced by more recent international trends than by an outdated Australian Antipodeanism.

‘Is There a New Art?’ was the pointer towards the innovations that Brook wished to signal. He examined his subject, whether critical text or art object, in terms of what it said or what it was, and recontextualised what he found. His deterritorialising method included references to the feelings and motivations of artists, to aesthetic theory, to art movements, to anything that he regarded as relevant to the work. Brook’s final argument in the 1969 paper, that the ‘expression theory’ of art was no longer dominant, was based on two observations. The first was that the ‘people most concerned – artists especially – are no longer behaving as if they believed it [expression theory].’ The second was that the new conventional language of art criticism remarked less on feeling and more on ‘optical ambiguity’, ‘figure-ground relation’, ‘pressure on the framing edge’ and so on.¹⁷ One of the final statements in the essay was about the role of the critic in the possibility of a new art that was not simply the expression of artistic sensibility and subjectivity:

If one insists – as one ought – on putting the deeper questions about the nature and purpose of art, on knowing what it is made for, then the answer that this generation seems to be on the

¹³ Brook, 1969a, p. 200.

¹⁴ For a recent account of nationalism and xenophobia in Australian landscape painting, see Hoorn, 2007.

¹⁵ Brook, 1969a, p. 205.

¹⁶ Brook, 1969a, p. 205.

¹⁷ Brook, 1969a, p. 204.

verge of proposing is that art is public and participatory, and its objects are not the precious incarnations of artists' feelings.¹⁸

By putting the critic, art, the object and 'this generation' together in one statement, Brook was presenting a particular view of contemporary art, a view quite different from Greenberg's and one that was to strongly influence the young art writer and academic, Terry Smith.

Brook was absolutely opposed to Greenberg's criticism, particularly his practice of dismissing art that did not immediately fit into his over-determined historicist teleology. Greenberg looked for pointers in contemporary artwork, pointers that indicated that the work fitted into the march of mainstream art history. For him, this was the measure of quality. Brook looked at contemporary artworks in a far more flexible way. If he approved of an artwork, he found it a place in his existing critical framework or, just as likely, changed the framework to make a place. In Brook's view, the critic's role was to ask and answer "deeper" questions – to probe and dig beneath the surface. He and not others, by implication, had done this, finding that art was 'public and participatory'. He was using these terms in the same sense as in the later essay, 'Flight from the Object', and meant that the audience saw and admired the same thing and that the relationship between the work and the viewer was part of the work. He began with the concept of praxis, by which he meant neither work nor theory, but the integrated necessity of both. But in this, the construction of nation did not figure at all, nor the Left's, nor Bernard Smith's long Cold War sublimation of radical politics. Brook believed that good art practice and art theory went together so his ambition was 'to get a good art school going as an organic part of the Power Institute'.¹⁹ David Saunders agreed with him but Smith was absolutely opposed to the idea:

When I had to deal with him he told me across the table that the teaching of art and studying art are two different things. The art teaching belongs at the trade school. It has no place in the university. This place is for intellectuals.²⁰

Brook said 'My own ambition – to get a good art school going inside the university as a part of the Power Institute – did not come for a moment within sight of realisation.'²¹ In September 1972, *Broadsheet* published extracts from the University of Sydney's student newspaper, *Honi Soit*. The article alleged that the Power Institute was 'suffering from the all-powerful Professor syndrome' and that Smith was 'exercising his autocratic power and proclaiming his infallibility.'²² The article referred to staff problems within the department: 'not only do students have no part in decision-making, neither do departmental staff. This has been only too obvious in the past in the attempts of Donald Brook to instigate course changes.'

¹⁸ Brook, 1969a, p. 206.

¹⁹ Donald Brook (1976), quoted in Kenyon, 1995, p. 10. Also see Smith, 1964.

²⁰ Marr Grounds, then lecturer in architecture at the University of Sydney and also a founder of the Tin Sheds, speaking in 1995 about Bernard Smith, quoted in Kenyon, 1995, p. 12. The same issues surface in Smith, 1964, and in Smith's lecture at the Contemporary Art Society in 1967, discussed by Lynn, 1967.

²¹ Donald Brook (1976), quoted in Kenyon, 1995, p. 10.

²² *Broadsheet*, 1972, p. 26.



Fig. 1. Donald Brook in his Canberra Studio, 1966 Photograph courtesy Donald Brook, Adelaide.

Even so, Brook, Saunders and artist Marr Grounds, a lecturer in architecture and a considerable Earth artist in his own right, were able to found the Tin Sheds art workshop as a laboratory for producing artwork.²³ They gained the use of four sheds in Darlington, across City Road from the University.²⁴ Lloyd Rees was using one of the sheds to teach drawing because of a lack of space in the architecture building. The workshop grew from there, with a ceramics studio and a sculpture workshop in another shed. Brook had reviewed *The Black Box*, 1969, a total environment Bert Flugelman had created at Oyster Bay, for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and next invited Flugelman, an Austrian-born artist/sculptor who had been teaching at the Gynea Technical College, to work and teach at the Tin Sheds. Flugelman set up an open workshop in one shed, using his own tools. One of the groups that soon formed there was an art collective called Optronic Kinetics. The members were Bert Flugelman, Jim McDonnell and David Smith, both electrical engineering students, and Julie Ewington, a fine arts student later to become well known as a writer and curator. Their works combined the technological with the creative. One of their best known projects was *Feathered Office*, 1971, described here by Brook:

One Monday morning I was delighted to find my own room transformed with chicken feathers ... set with their quills in an obsessively regular grid, as if the room had sprouted them, to its own astonishment, out of its own naturally tidy follicles.²⁵

But Brook's incorporation of the practice of contemporary art into the life of an art history department was an argument against the discipline of art history as it had been imported into Australia and as Smith had imported it into Sydney.

As it was evolving in Australia, the discipline was far from an ideal training ground for an understanding of contemporary art, for the art history departments of the University of Melbourne and Sydney University were preoccupied by theories and histories of the visual and grounded in older art history and its specific competencies such as the methods of connoisseurship, attribution and iconographical analysis, and the theories that had arisen in nineteenth century Germany. Brook's attempt to promote a laboratory for the actual practice of contemporary art by art history students within the framework of the University ran against the solidifying norm that art history and art practice would be separated. The battle over the curriculum taught to art history students was underpinned by Smith's desire to professionalise the discipline, and Elwyn Lynn's and Brook's contrary wish (despite their own constant disagreements and disputes with each other) to incorporate contemporary art and its practice into students' training. They lost.

Greenberg, exemplar of Cold War era cultural authority, delivered the inaugural Power Lecture at Sydney University's Power Institute in 1968.²⁶ This immediately crystallised Brook's thinking. He quickly wrote "Art Criticism: Authority and Argument," which was what he called a "closely argued denunciation" of Greenberg's lecture. His long and carefully

²³ Kenyon, 1995, p. 11: 'It is difficult to discover when the Sheds actually began. The matter has been debated by several historians. Some nominated January 11, 1969 at 2.43 p.m. (allegedly from a note to this effect in Marr Grounds diary).'

²⁴ The sheds were vacated by the CSIRO during 1968. One shed was contaminated with cyanide.

²⁵ Brook, 1970.

²⁶ The Power Institute was established in 1967 by a bequest from Dr John Power and the Power Lecture in Contemporary Art has been delivered annually at the Power Institute in the University of Sydney since 1968.

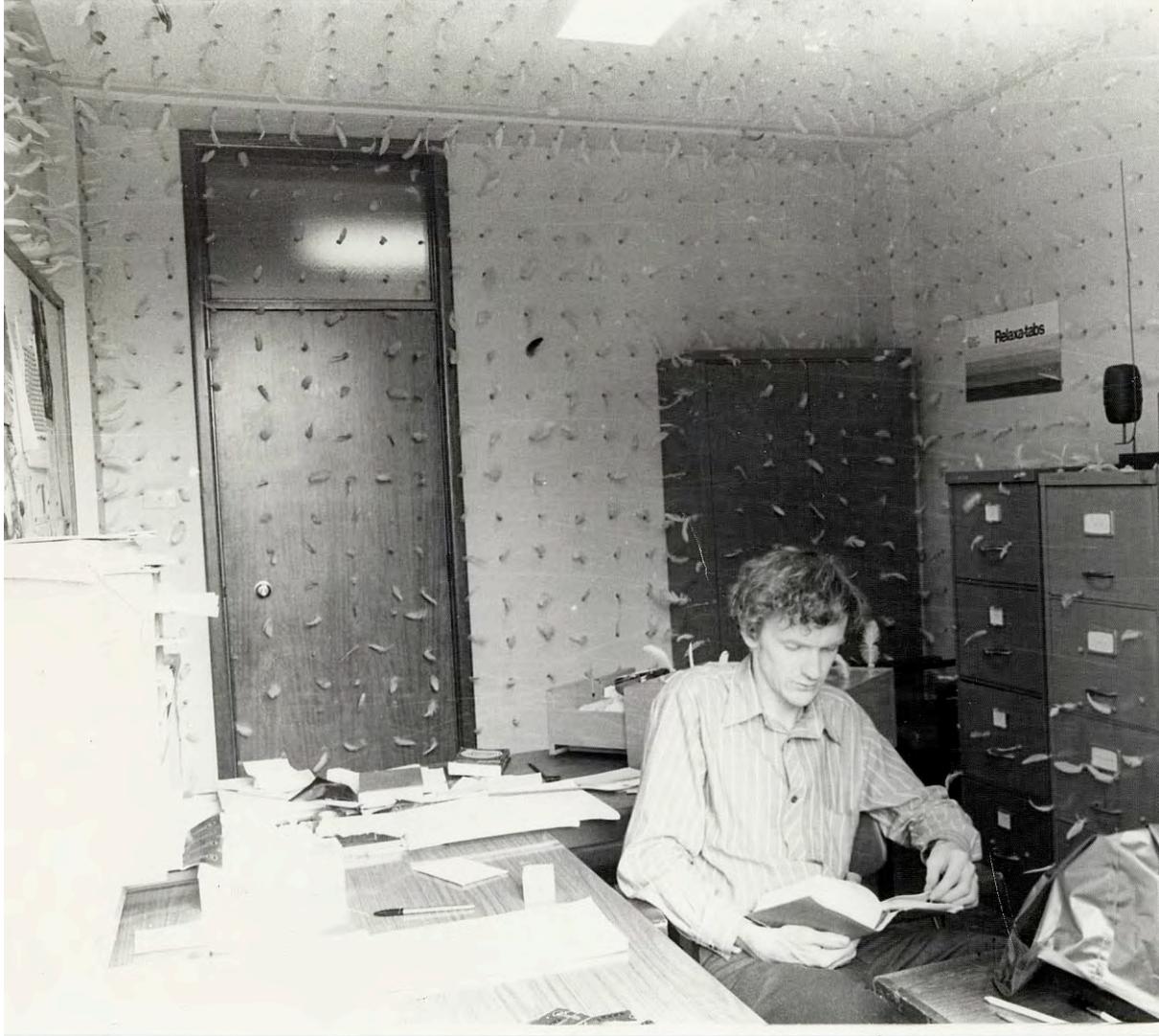


Fig. 2. Donald Brook working with Optronic Kinetics on Cubed Tree, 1971. Collection of the Post-Object and Documentary Art Collection, Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide. Courtesy Donald Brook, Adelaide

argued response was eventually published in the influential, widely read English art journal *Studio International* in 1970.²⁷ Brook had already submitted the manuscript to *Meanjin* twice. The first submission was lost and the second not published. He began with four ideas that, in his view, underlay Greenberg's critical practice, then attacked them. The first idea was that the history of art was the history of the linear evolution of styles, a linear-painterly dialectic that derived from Heinrich Wölfflin's account of European painting since the High Renaissance and Baroque periods.²⁸ Brook objected to this as self-serving and reductionist. It was, he said, really just a theory about painting, in which art was reduced to painting, and history was reduced to the early modern period in Europe. Everything and everywhere else lay outside this mainstream. A year later, Brook wrote that Greenberg's beloved Post-Painterly Abstraction, the paintings of Kenneth Noland and others, had been strongly resisted by the Australian middle generation of artists which was, amongst other things, committed 'chauvinistically against foreign influences other than those already licensed by its own plagiarisms.'²⁹ This was a pointed barb, and a manifestation of Brook's philosophical differences with the self-expressive humanism of Smith, Lynn and others. Similarly, Brook was a vociferous opponent of the acquisitions policy of the Power Institute and of its second curator, abstract painter and art critic Lynn who had been appointed in 1969.³⁰

Brook's essay, 'Flight from the Object', was the first coherent published theorisation of conceptual art written in Australia. It was presented in 1969 as the second Power Lecture. The essay was essentially a proposal for a new way of looking at art – a theory that could cope with post-object, post-studio, post-conceptual art – for as such was long overdue. The essay took up the opposition between two already historically loaded terms, 'objects and objecthood' [Brook's emphases]. The discussion of 'objects' stemmed from influential American critic and minimalist artist, Donald Judd's 1965 landmark essay, 'Specific Objects', from a constellation of related polemical essays by Judd and other American minimalist artists, and from Richard Wollheim's influential book, *Art and Its Objects*, widely distributed in Australia at the time in a Penguin paperback edition.³¹ The opposing term in the binary, 'objecthood', had been used extensively by the young art critic and at that point Greenberg acolyte, Michael Fried, in his famous 1967 essay, 'Art and Objecthood', to refer to the "condition of non-art", that is, to a form of art in the zones between painting, sculpture and theatre.³² Brook began 'Flight from the Object' by describing seven different ways in

²⁷ Brook, 1970.

²⁸ Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) proposed two fundamental but opposed modes of visual perception: the "linear" and the "painterly". In Wölfflin's scheme, the linear mode is characterised by limits, solidity, stability, permanence and objectivity. The painterly mode is characterised by general tonality, movement, transience, incompleteness and subjectivity. His most influential work was *Principles of Art History* (1915) that applied his scheme to the High Renaissance (linear) and Baroque (painterly) periods.

²⁹ Brook, 1971a, p. 77.

³⁰ See Brook, 1974, p. 27. Brook wrote, 'I have argued, here and there, that in both Mr Lynn's published writings and in his practice as curator of the Power Collection there has been clear indication of a degree of conservatism,' and later, 'I concluded an article in the *Broadsheet* of April 1972 with the words: 'Nobody, so far as I know, has gone into print with an account, much less a justification, of the Power Institute's present buying policy in relation to other strategies.'

³¹ Judd, 1965; Wollheim, 1968.

³² Fried, 1967, pp. 61-68: Fried adopted the term 'objecthood' to refer to the 'condition of non-art' (neither painting nor sculpture) of Minimalist Art. Here, Fried was following Greenberg's essay, 'Recentness of Sculpture' (1967), in which the latter had declared that Minimal artworks were close to the 'condition of non-art'.

which contemporary critics used the notion of “object”. This exhaustive typology typifies the philosophical bent of Brook’s art criticism.

For our purposes the two important elements now, several decades later, from his list are ‘the object as process’ and ‘the hermetic object’. The category of ‘hermetic object’ or objects independent of context, was at the heart of the essay. It was the crucial intersection of autobiography and the new art object. Minimal art objects were, he wrote, to be appraised ‘somehow in terms of their *external* relations – their contexts, settings, and viewers’.³³ Brook was interested in things that ‘represent a retreat – if not a flight – from the art-object that is conceived of as hermetic, isolated, and aesthetically self-sufficient.’³⁴ He quoted Greenberg’s ‘Recentness of Sculpture’ and Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’ to illustrate what he called “hostility to this enterprise from formalist critics”, and also to distinguish their formalist approach to art criticism from his. Of the notion of art as process, Brook wrote:

What we are now witnessing is odd, and conceptually disruptive: the flight of painters and sculptors from objects towards processes that deny one, or most, or even all of the characteristics of [immutability and immanence] – and in extreme cases that deny even the condition that some part of the action or the product shall be visible.³⁵

For Brook, the flight from the object was also a challenge to art critics who would have to develop a theory for what Brook had come to consider ‘a new art’. As we will discuss, Brook proposed two principles, “in the light of which one might begin to assess the current flight from the object”.³⁶

We must take him at his word. If we can retrospectively see that the flight from objects towards processes would result, for art, in at most the visible registration of process by indexical representation, then the use of the artist’s body in the new art involved identifying indexicality with autobiography. But the denial of visibility that was Brook’s final phrase ominously suggested the withholding of autobiography along with the traditional pleasures of art. We retrospectively see that this combination – the denial of *both* immanence and visible materiality – was likely to lead to crisis rather than praxis, that much used but mystifying word so common in the later 1960s, and a word that had been central to Brook. The replacement of praxis by crisis will be traced in the remainder of the essay.

Brook’s first thesis in ‘Flight from the Object’ was the ‘principle of publicity’. This was a rejection of the ‘radically subjective’:

Whatever the artist makes or does should be in principle a public entity; because only that which is (in principle) available to anyone is capable of supporting a common language, a common understanding, and a community of values.³⁷

³³ Brook, 1969c, p. 24.

³⁴ Brook, 1969c, p. 24.

³⁵ Brook, 1969c, p. 28.

³⁶ Brook, 1969c, p. 31.

³⁷ Brook, 1969c, p. 31.

In 1969, this utopian-sounding prescription was aimed squarely against hallucinatory drugs, psychedelia, and the further counter-cultural fringes of conceptualist art that already loomed. Brook sourly opined that, ‘it is at any rate plain enough that hallucinations are not public objects’.³⁸ This was a repudiation of what he later described as ‘the aesthetic perception of inner experiences’.³⁹ The reason was that Brook firmly believed for a critical discussion to have any validity, the participants must be talking about the same object.

On the occasion that he used the phrase ‘aesthetic perception of inner experiences’, Brook had been discussing the work of Ian Milliss, a young Sydney artist whose work he thought was the most radical of the time. Brook took two of Milliss’s odd works, *Walk Along This Line*, 1970, and *Floor Piece*, 1970. In each, Milliss insisted, his work of art was the ‘inner somatic and psychological experience’ of negotiating the object, which did not literally exist. Brook commented that he believed that Milliss was ‘mistaken in trying to locate the work of art in the realm of private individual experience, rather than in the public world.’

Brook’s second thesis was the ‘principle of exploration’:

Art activities are most properly thought of as the locus for free exploration, invention, and creative imagination. The arts are chronically prone to sclerosis, and they should be encouraged to resist the inflexibilities that are threatened by exclusivist aesthetic doctrines, of prescribed forms and styles, of alleged historical necessities, and of absolute aesthetic judgements.⁴⁰

This neatly encapsulated his ideal art criticism and his opinion of the then-dominant strands of art criticism that were locked in an embrace of hostile dependency: first, that of Greenberg and his Australian followers; and second, the by-then undeniably conservative humanism of local art reviewers, museum directors such as Laurie Thomas, and even Bernard Smith. The function of criticism was not to ‘detect aesthetic value in new things’ but to ‘determine the value of new things by assigning them a place in our general structure of values, and arguing for that disposition’. Brook was not arguing that the critic does not have preconceptions and expectations, but he was arguing that those preconceptions and expectations should not form the basis for art criticism. Brook was asserting that an art critic should come to every work of art without preconceptions and expectations, and (unlike Greenberg, or Thomas, or Lynn, or Smith) should look at what this art is, what it does, and how it performed its self-set task. Some art might be assessed according to existing paradigms but other art definitely could not. The latter were the challenging and exciting works of new art.

Inhibodress

Brook found his new art, locating the flight from the object at Inhibodress, a small alternative Sydney gallery run by a cooperative of artists from November 1970 until August 1972. Intended as a space for the most experimental art possible, it was conceived by artist Mike Parr in 1970 and modestly declared itself ‘a gallery with a few radical differences’:

³⁸ Brook, 1969c, p. 31.

³⁹ Brook, 1969c, p. 17 and Brook, 1971, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Brook, 1969c, p. 32.

1. It is being initiated, financed and maintained solely by artists.
2. It is a non-profit proposition in contrast to all private Sydney galleries.
3. It is being founded without any interest in identity, or in representing any school of art.
4. It will be a low-rent venue for frequent theatre, music and poetry experiments.⁴¹

The collective began with eleven artists (John Armstrong, Bill Brown, Terry English, Neils Neilson Elmoos, James Elwing, Michael Gifford, Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy, Orest Kewan, Mike Parr, and Rolla Primrose), amongst whom Mike Parr, Peter Kennedy and Tim Johnson were the organizing cabal. This cooperative, shoe-string utopia was short-lived. By the end of 1971, only Mike Parr, Peter Kennedy and one other artist, Tim Gibb, remained with the gallery. Through their work at Sydney University's Tin Sheds, they met with other artist groups, including Optronic Kinetics, earlier discussed, who later joined Inhibodress. The gallery was definitely not run like the mainstream, well-heeled, well-catered for Woollahra galleries of the period, the most famous of which was Rudy Komon's. According to critic Ross Lansell's on the spot description for *The Nation*:

Inhibodress added to this insult (discouraging the buyable) by being an anti-gallery. Without a director and without paid staff, it had chosen premises in a light-brick commercial building in a Woolloomooloo backstreet. On weekdays it opens at 5.30 pm and stays open till 8.30 pm, and again unlike the commercial galleries, it is open all Sunday.⁴²

Brook singled out many Inhibodress exhibitions for review. His 1971 *Studio International* report, 'Sydney Commentary: New Art in Australia', mentioned the gallery's aspirations in a discussion of Parr, Johnson and Kennedy:

The impulse is everywhere growing to find a form, a context, a common basis for artistic activity outside the dealer-system and uncommitted to the production of those permanent, portable, marketable objects that have sustained the traditional business of the visual arts.⁴³

It is clear from this that Brook hoped Inhibodress would be a venue for the 'new art' that he was mapping out. In retrospect, Kennedy confirmed that Inhibodress was 'something of a cause' for Brook and the young critic Terry Smith.⁴⁴ Not only did Brook support these artists in Sydney by providing a place for them to teach and by promoting their exhibitions, he used his own international connections to make them known outside Australia. He chose to write about a particularly focused list of young Australian artists. During 1971, his *Studio International* essays covered Mike Parr, Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy, John Armstrong and

⁴¹ Hall, 1970. For a blow-by-blow account of this short-lived but very important gallery, see Cramer, 1989. Sue Cramer's exemplary, closely-researched publication for the exhibition of the same name, *Inhibodress 1970-72*, is so detailed that it obviates any need to provide detailed descriptions of works; we draw on this publication for the remainder of this article.

⁴² Lansell, 1971, p. 13.

⁴³ Brook, 1971a, p. 78.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, 1982, p. 50. This is a reprint of a 1974 typescript essay written by Peter Kennedy, titled 'Inhibodress: A Personal Account – Just for the Record', dated 30 December 1974, held in the Post-Object Archive, Flinders University Art Museum; the quote appears on p. 4 of the original typescript.

Ian Milliss in February, and David Smith, Noel Hutchison, Joan Grounds and Optronic Kinetics in July. The danger, Brook saw, was that Australian ‘new art’ might be lost – a victim not of hostility but of indifference – because the art world would not see its significance. Brook saw an important place for the art critic in the transition from old to new theoretical frameworks and, like Bernard Smith and Robert Hughes before him, was ready to actively intervene as a participant, not a passive reviewer. Theory’s place was alongside its objects.



Fig. 3. Mike Parr, *Hold a match in your mouth for as long as possible*, 1973. Colour photograph. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

The artists did not intend to make this association easy. Their work was doubly difficult. First, according to Brook’s schema, it looked like a point on the trajectory away from the art object towards literature. Brook had already emphasised conceptual art’s link with poetry, an idea linked to other critics’ concepts of fiction and unconstrained interpretation that were being expounded in Europe at the same time. Brook wrote:

It seems to me that a lot of the conceptual artists are leading the visual arts more and more closely to the condition of poetry, so that you can “get” the work in any way – you don’t have to see it, the visual is not of the essence. You can be told about it, read about it, etc.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Brook, 1971c, p. 15.

Second, this was as complicated as it sounded. Artists had already recognised that visual language in art was riven by the duality implied specifically by their arts' 'visual language'. By this, we mean to say that just as art uses a syntax of simultaneously figurative (visual) and poetic (literary) images so, as Italian critic Gillo Dorfles had observed in an essay written shortly before, that some of the artists in this essay encountered, the simultaneous presence of these 'two imaged' universes was not only evident but – this is the crucial though odd point we wish to make – duplicitous and deliberately confusing. Dorfles had asserted that this was specifically, in his cryptic words (though words that were familiar to art writers and theorists of the period) a dialectic of '*contamination*' of the pictorial linguistic element by the literary one.⁴⁶ In interviews and in several important articles at the time, Brook also traced the declining role of vision and truth in contemporary art and argued against its usually-assumed claim to a phenomenological base, describing the consequences – specifically in conceptual and similar post-object art such as he reviewed at Inhibodress – as a flight from the object towards literature: 'there is a case for saying that conceptual art is really literature – but literature of an especially wry kind, having become literature from a past as visual art.'⁴⁷ When Terry Smith asked Brook if Fluxus artist George Brecht's performance instructions were poetry, Brook responded by contrasting conceptual art, which he described as a poetic discourse, against performance and Body Art, which were not primarily poetic even though they also rejected the primacy of sight. The latter two were, Brook said, really based in the experience of bodily sensation: 'Thus things like these are sense dependent, and are not conceptual art.'⁴⁸ If conceptual art was visual "poetry", it was neither completely lyrical nor allegorical though it sometimes, as will be seen, possessed a certain mordant, black humour.

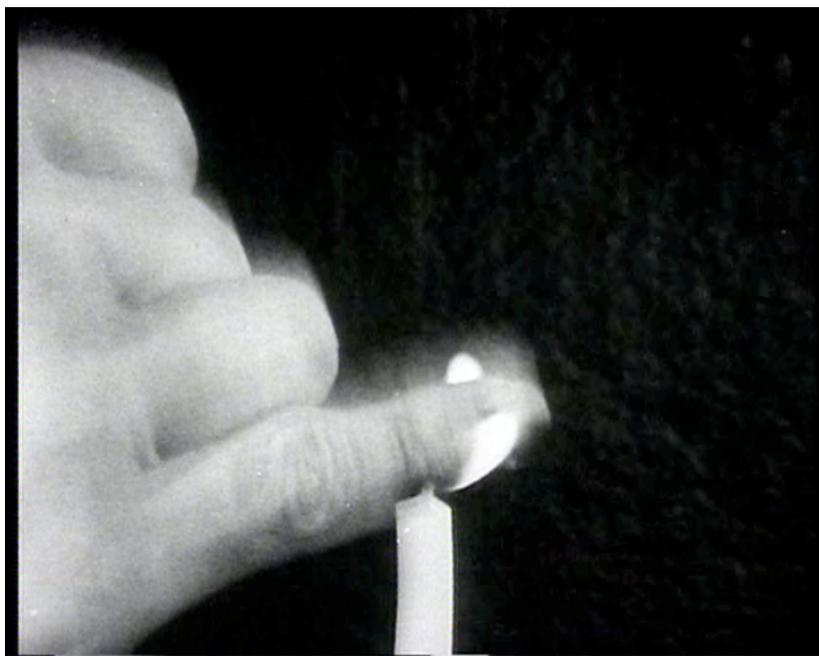


Fig. 4. Mike Parr, *Hold your finger in a flame*, 1973. Black and white photograph. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

⁴⁶ Dorfles, 1967, n.p.

⁴⁷ Brook, 1971c, p. 16; also see Brook, 1975

⁴⁸ Brook, 1971c, p. 15.

The apparent impossibility of communication was of interest to many artists who responded by altering their artistic biographies—whether in collaborations, hoaxes or fictions. The Inhibodress artists’ drift towards an increasingly literary and autobiographical production of written, typed texts, boxes of documents, low-key video or film recordings of simple actions, and the paraphernalia of quasi-resource centres was remarkably consistent with this. They had recognised the quality of artistic contamination and the degradation of art. It was reflected in their experimentation with artistic collaboration and unconventional forms of artistic identity and their understanding of the inaccessibility of their art.

The Inhibodress artists were also conscious of their position at the terminal pole on Brook’s trajectory of difficult art.⁴⁹ As Parr commented:

Conceptual art will have been proved worthless unless some artists follow it completely through. It may come to a situation where it is impossible to identify it as art, but there is nothing wrong or dangerous in it. It will become more bookish.⁵⁰

Parr’s prescription implied a transformation in the nature of the artist or artists producing such art. The flight from the object would occur in both an artist’s working methods (art could be produced in intense collaborations or as documentary registrations of the artist’s existence, as Parr was to demonstrate) and psychology (art-as-contaminated-autobiography was intended often to effect a personal transformation, unleashing unconstrained interpretation and a new artist). Parr retrospectively observed that:

Inhibodress also opened the way for a new kind of artist [...]. We were particularly interested in problems of self-management and the essential aspects of our own experience, and our concepts of ‘new form’ flowed directly from such ideas.⁵¹

Parr valued the idea of an artist’s loss of personal biography, for biography is another way of talking about cultural authority. The flight from the object therefore reflected the decline in the belief in a need to represent the possession of traditionally-valued artistic mastery, encapsulated by Brook’s rejection of the fetish of the figure of the intensely individualistic, alienated artist. That this critique was occurring in Sydney, a centre relatively remote from New York, was no accident. The motifs of impurity, peripherality and marginality which Dorfles had seen as a particular property of poetry but which both the New Yorker Greenberg and Brook in Sydney would have understood as basic to theatre, were being demonstrated in the mutation of proposition-based New York conceptualism through its deliberate artistic distortion and dilution in a tiny Woolloomooloo gallery in apparently far-away Sydney.

In 1972, Dr H.C. (“Nugget”) Coombs, Whitlam’s great reformist public servant, commissioned papers from Brook, A.D. Hope and John Passmore as a preliminary to the establishment of what is now the Australia Council. Brook’s essay, ‘How Shall the Arts Flourish?’ made three policy proposals. First, he proposed that public funds be invested at

⁴⁹ For a contemporary account of the Tin Sheds, see Mackinolty, 1977, pp. 38-43.

⁵⁰ Parr, 1971a, p. 17.

⁵¹ Parr, 1989, p. 71.

points 'where change is already incipient but is suspended for lack of a precipitating factor.'⁵² His reasoning was that traditional art forms such as painting already attracted institutional and market support, but new art forms such as performance and installation needed help. His second proposal was that,

Interference with artistic systems should take place as high in the scale of activity toward originality, innovation and fresh creative endeavour as the socio-political climate will stand.⁵³

He was re-stating the argument that mainstream art already has sources of public and private support. Brook recognised that his policy would lead to complaints of elitism but he insisted that this was the way to nurture vigorous art.

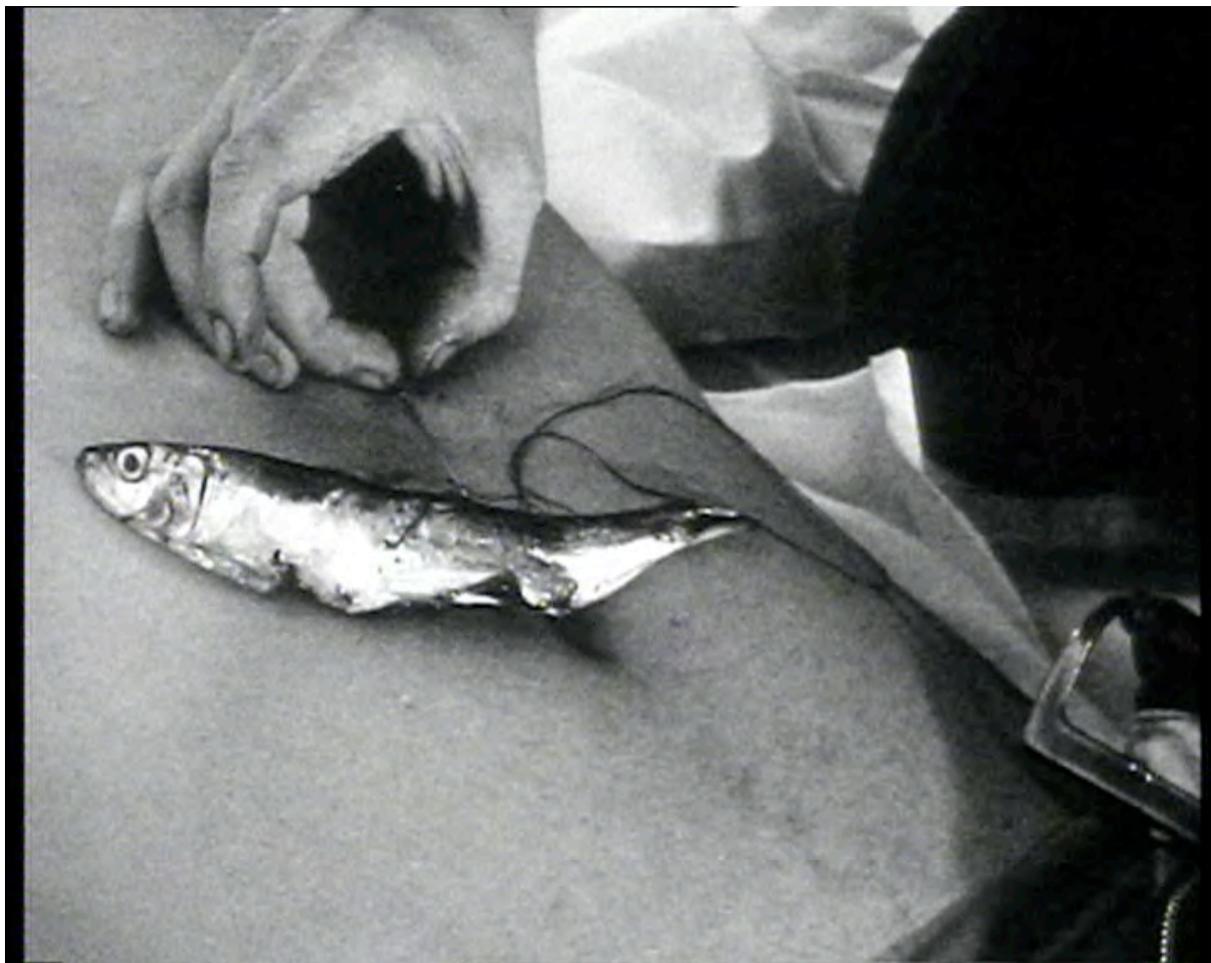


Fig. 5. Mike Parr, *Sew a fish on to your skin*, 1973. Black and white photograph. Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

⁵² Brook, 1972, p. 13.

⁵³ Brook, 1973, p. 16.

In 1974 Brook left Sydney. He became the founding (and the last) Professor of Art at Flinders University, Adelaide (the city had a small but flourishing avant-garde art scene, and Robert Smith had already begun the teaching of visual art at Flinders University), and was then instrumental in founding the Experimental Art Foundation, also in Adelaide, an institution that embodied the *kunsthalle* – the art laboratory – ethos he had identified at Inhibodress.⁵⁴ The EAF was not attached to Flinders University nor to any other university, but was a completely independent, and therefore financially fragile, organisation. It began in 1974 with gallerist Richard Llewellyn (who had been the owner of Llewellyn Galleries) as its Secretary. He was later replaced by a Director, the long-serving Noel Sheridan, who was supported by a Board that included Flugelman (who had been involved with the Tin Sheds), Clifford Frith, Ian North, and activist film-maker Aggy Read, who had produced a film for artist Parr. The EAF was established without government funding, though Australia Council grants arrived a year or two later. The venture was, effectively, the outcome of Brook's vision of the new art. He gave an account of the rationale behind the EAF in a brief 1975 article for *Art and Australia*.⁵⁵ Brook's central proposition was that art should be conceived of as an 'arena of open experiment' that would frequently produce art that would be 'dispositionally hostile to the status quo' and consequently attract very little institutional support.⁵⁶ The EAF was to be a centre for the nurturing of this difficult and by definition unpopular experimental art. Brook's article is full of pronouncements. It is a manifesto, repeating the propositions that Brook had argued for in earlier essays, beginning with his by now familiar diagnosis: 'The failure of essentialist theories of art ... has left the concept in ruins'. He had argued this first in 1967 in 'Theory and Criticism'. Next came, 'the distinctive centre of the concept of art is the experimental role that it has in human life'. This had been his Principle of Exploration in 'Flight from the Object'. He followed this with an epigrammatic comment: 'Experimental art . . . requires cultivation precisely because it is unnatural'. The ways in which this art was 'unnatural' were as follows: it could be sharply defined; it was not found in museums; it was not popular; it was by disposition hostile to the status quo.

Brook's motivation for his involvement with the Tin Sheds and now with the EAF had been to create a space for concepts that we recognize as both marked by the early 1970s inchoate anxiety and by Brook's prescient recognition of a relational aesthetics that might join audience, art space, art historian and artist. However, as Ann Newmarch, Stephanie Britton and others recalled in the EAF's valedictory 1984 publication, *A Decade at the EAF*, Brook's flight from the object at the EAF was already being subverted by local artists' other priorities, particularly political and especially feminist ideologies (that Newmarch embodied in her own art, and which we will take up in a forthcoming essay on *LIP*, the feminist art magazine).⁵⁷ The pages of the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia's publication, *Broadsheet*, were filled during the mid-1970s with the polemical sparring between Brook and his Adelaide adversaries, in particular with Brian Medlin, the radical leftist Professor of Philosophy at Flinders University, who was also the organizer of the Progressive Art Movement. Medlin was also to surface as an adversary to Art & Language when they attempted to hold discussions-as-art in Adelaide in 1975. The EAF in its initial incarnation

⁵⁴ Britton, 1984.

⁵⁵ Brook, 1975, p. 378.

⁵⁶ Brook, 1975, p. 378.

⁵⁷ Britton, 1984.

did not last long, for though the organization was to continue into the twenty-first century, by 1984 when *A Decade at the EAF* appeared, its mission had already shifted from laboratory to the exhibition of art, like other centres for contemporary art in Australian capital cities. Far from simply a local Adelaide footnote, this indicated the fragility of a flight from the art object, even amongst the most radical artists.

In his 1971 essay, 'Sydney Commentary: New Art in Australia', Brook began by encapsulating Australian art: 'If one epithet had to be found it would be, necessarily and neutrally, provincial'. He pointed to the uncertain application of metropolitan values combined with independent local and sometimes conflicting values. This, he wrote, was common to all provincial cultures. Brook believed that Australian art could not be metropolitan until Australian cities became international cultural centres with the metropolitan power to make taste.⁵⁸ There had been, he wrote, 'four distinct waves of assault upon the problem of producing major art beyond the odds': Dobell and Drysdale, who were the foundations of the insular local art-investment market; Nolan, Tucker, Boyd and Blackman, who had made short-lived 'overseas reputations'; a new generation (Terry Smith's Central Street group) who reacted against expressive painting and had adopted a more or less conventional post-painterly abstraction deriving from New York; and, finally, an emerging generation of very young artists. Quite a list. The latter, he said were:

The first adults of the global village, who do not think of themselves as inferior to their contemporaries in London and New York, nor even as being much worse-placed since the machinery of art-marketing has slipped gear with the main creative ideas, and success may not be much longer measured in terms of product sales.⁵⁹

This was an astute observation, one that imagined a shift from centre-margin relationships of dependency to global relationships based on collaboration, combined with his recognition of the sheer power of the art market, a power that Bernard Smith had never grasped. We have seen that Brook had noted, in 'Is There a New Art?', that young artists did not necessarily admire European over American models. Now Brook was observing that the 'ideal no-place' and the weakening of the power of the art market's ability to arbitrate cultural forms had allowed young artists to sidestep the issue of provincialism. And in the process, we would argue, they sidestepped the issue of national art with its attendant, insular regionalism.

Conclusion: Praxis and Failure

It was very difficult, no matter what the young artists' intentions, to distinguish new art-as-process from theatrical performance, and even more difficult to abstain from simply categorising it as a new medium or genre through the lens of anodyne pluralism, and leaving it at that. Brook's 'Post-Object Art: Is It Wicked or Is It a Revision of Our Concepts?' was published in the *Current Affairs Bulletin*, a pamphlet-sized adult education publication, in 1973.⁶⁰ The essay was an attempt to find new methods to describe the new art. Brook elaborated an argument against historicism, rehearsing standard art historical method: chronological structure; causality; a relatively extended time span; a relatively narrow

⁵⁸ Brook, 1971a, p. 77.

⁵⁹ Brook, 1971a, p. 77.

⁶⁰ Brook, 1973.

mainstream; and, therefore, a long, simplifying perspective. Could, he asked, recent events 'be made to fit persuasively into a pattern that does not rely on a linear succession of stylistic changes, like biblical begatting?'⁶¹ He went on to argue that:

Post-object art, systematically thought out, has a historical location in our own time, and a logic obtained by questioning the assumptions of a previous time and substituting others.⁶²

Opposed to a methodology that excluded everything that did not fit into a preconceived and often teleological system, insisting that if a theory could not account for post-object art then the theory was flawed and not the art, Brook needed to find art that did not easily default into pre-existing media or genres, even new media. While conceding that there may have been a basis for claims that post-object art was 'simply not *art*', he criticised conservatives for resisting post-object art. He insisted – this is significant – that the issue was still to be argued: it might even be decided after all that the work was not art. However, that decision could not be made without knowing what art was.

Brook clearly thought that his fellow critics, implicitly Smith, Lynn, Thomas and McCulloch, were intimidated by the new art. Instead of rising to the challenge of finding its place, they retreated to conservative, safe aesthetic criteria, declaring it not to be art at all.⁶³ In Brook's view, the critic's role as policeman (a simple-minded conception that still dominates art writing and reviewing in Australia) was wrong-headed: 'Artists should never be discouraged because they may be making some sort of conceptual error, but should rather be encouraged because they may be playing a part in the revision of our concepts.'⁶⁴ Much later, in 2002, he recalled, 'I supported (more or less) all forms of post-object art – including its conceptual variations – subject to the fundamental criterion that the work must be a public object.'⁶⁵ For him, part of the power of Christo's *Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, One Million Square Feet, Sydney, Australia* (1969) was that it raised 'either explicitly or by implication nearly every question that ought to matter to us about art now.'⁶⁶ The concluding sentence of 'Post-Object Art' can be taken as a statement of Brook's close critical perspective; 'If we are disposed to argue with our artists we ought to do it walking alongside, not standing in their way.'⁶⁷

The critic might stand at the centre of the action and walk alongside the artist, but neither of these new roles would prevent such a role-dissolving praxis disintegrating as the experimentation of the early 1970s crystallized into new stylistic definitions. Artistic activity within gallery walls (and the associated artistic careers based on innovation and signature style) eventually and inevitably conflicted with a post-object practice based either on critical social interaction or relational experiment. Parr and Kennedy were in disagreement over precisely this issue. In his apocalyptic and valedictory 1975 essay for the Mildura Sculpture

⁶¹ Brook, 1973, p. 275.

⁶² Brook, 1973, p. 276.

⁶³ Brook, 1982, p. 6-8.

⁶⁴ Brook, 1973, p. 275.

⁶⁵ Brook, 2002.

⁶⁶ Brook, 1969b, p. 230.

⁶⁷ Brook, 1973, p. 282.

Triennial, where scores of young artists jostled for the artistic edge beside the Murray River floodplain, Terry Smith observed that:

We find ourselves at the tail end of a decade quantitatively rich in the production of diverse and extreme art, yet paradoxically marked by a failure of sensibility such that the making of art has become an embattled, rootless and theoretically-fragile pursuit.⁶⁸

Other artists were now dramatizing the incommensurability and fragility of biographical indexicality, of the instability of the art that had embodied Brook's concepts.

Brook had been an activist within the evolving art history establishment in Australia. He had battled on two fronts. He maintained an unrelenting argument against art history as a discipline and proposed an entirely different training for art historians and artists, a position that he developed over the following decades. He had used his position as an academic and art critic, contributing to international art magazines and new Australian journals such as *Other Voices*, to support young Australian artists. He had helped establish, in collaboration with artists and University colleagues, the Tin Sheds, an art workshop where students could work alongside artists. But Brook took a critical stance that was wildly outside that of the Australian art establishment, and he was sacked from his position as art critic at the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Brook never became firmly part of the Australian art establishment, as Terry Smith eventually did, because Brook was not at all concerned about Australian identity, nor about provincialism, nor about regionalism versus internationalism. Brook had argued that there was a difference between dissent within art institutions – within a closed shop – and dissent issuing from art. Only the former, which could be appropriated easily by galleries and their curators, was to remain visible within art discourse.⁶⁹

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⁶⁸ Smith, T., 1975, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Brook, 1982, p. 6.

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