UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY UTS TOWER
15 BROADWAY, ULTIMO SYDNEY 2007

FRIDAY 5 JANUARY 2024 - SUNDAY 28 JANUARY 2024
MONDAY–FRIDAY   **8AM–10PM**
SATURDAY–SUNDAY   **8AM–6PM**

Ian Burn, Ian Andrews, Diana Baker-Smith, Belle Blau, Louisa Bufardeci, Jacqueline Bradley, Chris Caines, Billy Gruner, David Haines and Joyce Hinterding, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, Sarah Keighery, Graham Davis King, Tarn McLean, Hilarie Mais, ochromosonico, Jonny Niesche, Rachel Peachey and Paul Mosig, Elizabeth Pulie, Robert Pulie, Todd Robinson, Sandra Selig, Gemma Smith, Mark Titmarsh, Justin Trendall, Nina Walton, Gary Warner, Justene Williams.

Associated artists: Margel Hinder, Michael Johnson, Ken Unsworth, Tony McGillick, Col Jordan, John Dallwitz, Chris Bull.

@ABORA32024

ABORA **⊹ UTS**

THE 3RD AUSTRALIAN BIENNALE OF
REDUCTIVE ART

REFLEX

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY
UTS TOWER
15 BROADWAY, ULTIMO SYDNEY 2007

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CURATED BY MARK TITMARSH AND BILLY GRUNER

Deep Pockets

The story of the *The 3rd Australian Biennale of Reductive Art* (ABORA 3) begins in 2017 with artist and curator Billy Gruner and his longstanding international connection with a network of artists focused on the reductive arts and its influences on contemporary practices. Consequently ABORA 3 is a uniquely 21st Century phenomenon that promotes the critical aspect of what has been called 'postconceptual' practice. It indicates work coming after Conceptual Art of the 1960s and carries with it a critical perspective on how art is made, presented and received by audiences, institutions, and economies. Many of the artists involved share a common interest in methodologies and processes of constructive art and formal principles rather than emotive, figurative, or narrative work. Some of these principles are derived from earlier 20th avant-gardes such as Russian Constructivism, Suprematism and the Bauhaus with its fusion of art, design and architecture. However in the contemporary context new terms are required to identify what is taking place in many places around the world. Reductive Art stands out amongst many other options,[1] since it describes what is most common between artists from London, New York, Sydney, Paris, Prague and Tokyo. Many of the artists have been academically trained in a fusion of theory and practice that might be called 'research-making' and tending towards a highly reduced format. In 2017 Gruner also developed a connection with Roland Orepuk the director of the French Biennale of International Non Objective Art (BINOA) to create a constellation of interconnected events across multiple European and American cities that indicated the global nature of the phenomenon. As a result Gruner curated the first ABORA in 2017, subtitled "Coterie to Coterie", hosted by The Deerubbin Aboriginal Land Council in the Stores Building in Parramatta, Sydney. In 2019 ABORA 2 subtitled "Que de Femme" was held at West Projects in the Blue Mountains, with 50 works by women from around the globe, curated by Gruner and Sarah Keighery. This year ABORA 3 coincides with BINOA 7 to continue those global/local discussions in art making and discourse.

At the outset we acknowledge that the word 'Biennale' carries a large amount of gravitas at one end and baggage at the other. It usually signifies a large-scale international art exhibition that surveys the current state of contemporary art updated every two years. The *Venice Biennale* and the *Sydney Biennale* come to mind but also *The Great Exhibition* of 1851 held at the Crystal Palace in London which was fundamentally influential on how we think of survey shows of any kind. *The Great Exhibition* also inaugurated the idea of a World Fair displaying the fruits of global industry, design and the arts under the imperial leadership of Western (mostly British) economic and democratic ideologies. The first *Venice Biennale* of 1895 was meant to revive the city culturally after the collapse of the Grand Tour model, later evolving in the 20th Century to become an international survey of contemporary art outside of institutional or museum-based understandings. This critical aspect of the *Venice Biennale* has degenerated into a form of market-based institutionalisation now challenged by independent parallel exhibitions in Venice and more rigorously by *Documenta* and *Munster Projects* in Germany. A recent critique of all Biennales and international survey shows is that they were founded on a colonial basis of Eurocentric bias towards Western modes of art making and appreciation that marginalised or spectacularised the Global South as the ethnic other. Recent *Sydney Biennales* and *Documentas* have attempted to correct this bias with various levels of success.

ABORA 3 and BINOA 7 deal with some of these issues in different ways in that BINOA 7 operates on a decentralised relationship with its satellite cities, and ABORA 3 activates its relation to the Australian context of Indigenous histories and practices of *being in place*. Furthermore ABORA 3 and BINOA 7 take place outside traditional institutional contexts in that they are self-funded and self-defining, much like a massively scaled up artist run initiative.

ABORA 3 also carries on the tradition of multiple venues by distributing itself across three events in Brisbane, the Blue Mountains and Sydney. The first two in private houses and domestic spaces and the final in a public space in the Tower at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). ABORA 3 is subtitled *Reflex* as a reference to Ian Burn's painting 'Blue Reflex' made in 1967. Ian Burn was a foundation conceptual artist, curator and writer who spent the first part of his career in the 1960s and 70s in London and New York working collaboratively with the group Art & Language, whose members variously included Joseph Kosuth, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden. In the late 1970s Burn returned to Australia and became involved in the Art Workers Union championing artists' rights as well as establishing Union Media Services with Ian Milliss, a business providing journalism and promotional designs for the Union Movement. Burn's combination of critical art works and politics led to an enduring practice where thinking and the visual are intimately and productively linked.

Consequently 'Blue Reflex' will form the visual and conceptual centre of ABORA 3 with other Australian artists showing a line of development from there to the present, indicating a critical postconceptual strand in contemporary Australian art. A second Ian Burn work in the show, from his *Value Added Landscape* series, opens up a discussion of non-Indigenous relations to land and Country.

Eisenmenger House, Brisbane/Meanjin.

The first instalment ABORA 3.1 was launched in Brisbane/Meanjin at the Eisenmenger House in September 2023. The Eisenmenger house was built in 1961 by architect Barry Walduck for the Eisenmenger family and restored by the editors of Australian Modern magazine Chris Osborne and Susan Bennett in 2002. Walduck's 'mid-Century modern' design was inspired by Californian Case Study Houses mostly built in Los Angeles as experiments in American residential architecture during the post war housing boom.

ABORA 3.1 (co-curated by Billy Gruner, Tarn McLean and Mark Titmarsh) focused on Australian artists engaging with reductive art and postformalism purposefully shown in a domestic non-institutional setting. The context of private homes as exhibition space stands apart from the white cube in that it activates instead a pre-institutional method of community engagement that reaches back to self-organising arts societies of the mid 20th Century. In that context, clusters of interested communities made of artists and their supporters gathered around locales the Reed Family at Heide near Melbourne, and the Rose Seidler House in Sydney. Later on in a similar vein, artist groups like Art Hotline and West Projects produced ongoing considerations of what can constitute contemporary art practice by showing experimental work in living rooms, stairwells, bedrooms, yards, footpaths, and other disused ancillary spaces like warehouses and phone booths. A variation on this is the so called 'house museum' that in some cases have evolved into ongoing collections like the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice. This would include houses devoted to individual artists like Norman Lindsay in the Blue Mountains New South Wales (NSW) and the Pollock-Krasner House in East Hampton in the USA. The Eisenmenger House has become a similar kind of cultural centre regularly hosting events like the *Anywhere Festival* and other temporary music and video events.
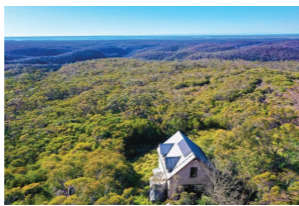
Kree House, Woodford/Deerubbin, Blue Mountains, NSW.

The second instalment ABORA 3.2 (co-curated by Billy Gruner and Mark Titmarsh) took place in late October 2023 at the Kree House at Woodford/Deerubbin in the Blue Mountains NSW in a bush setting that forms an important preserve for the endangered Red Tail Cockatoo. The Kree House was designed and built by Australian architect George Wilkie and is accessed on a heritage listed mountain trail cut by convicts and explorers in the 19th Century. Known variously as Cox's Road and the Old Bathurst Road this rough-hewn track was traversed by a 26-year-old Charles Darwin in 1836 on his way to Wentworth Falls and Bathurst. On an 11 day journey in search of reputed natural wonders he had his so called 'platypus epiphany' that would lead to a questioning of Creationism and the development of the new idea of natural selection.[2] ABORA 3.2 also inaugurates the new location of West Projects Space and its associated artist residency.

The third and final stage, ABORA 3.3 (co-curated by Mark Titmarsh and Billy Gruner) is in a public space on the ground floor of the 32 story UTS Tower in Sydney/Gadigal. The Tower was designed in 1964 by Michael Dysart from the NSW Government Architect's Office, and officially opened in a highly modified form in 1979. The Tower is seen as a prime example of Brutalism characterised by a minimalist construction aesthetic that foregrounds unadorned building materials and raw structural elements rather than any kind of decorative design. The Tower has been identified by many including Frank Gehry as Sydney's ugliest building. Dysart claims he set out to integrate architecture and engineering in a synthesis of design with "nothing concealed behind false ceilings, render or gyprock."[3] Consequently we could say that all three ABORA venues make architectural statements in alignment with the reductive nature of the artworks and are in some kind of discussion with modernism and formalism.

UTS Tower, Sydney/ Gadigal.

Formalism in the recent history of fine art is usually associated with the aesthetics of Clement Greenberg. But there are many formalisms and many histories of the term that might include the contributions of Kant, Alois Riegel, Wilhelm Worringer, Clive Bell, and Roger Fry. Very schematically formalism indicates a primary concern with form, the being of an artwork based on essential elements such as line, colour and materials that can be separated out from the subject matter or contents of the work. It is usually a method for interpreting works but many artists have become associated with a practice that seems predisposed to a formalist engagement particularly from the period of Post Impressionism and Cubism through various avant-garde Abstract Art movements culminating in Abstract Expressionism. In this context Greenberg, Formalism and Abstract Expressionism converge on the idea of medium specificity where each art form would exert its own "unique and proper area of competence."[4] In painting, which was Greenberg's major focus, this meant three primary elements; the flatness of the substrate, the shape of the support and the properties of the paint. Ironically it was the development and intensification of some of these aspects that lead to postformalism and a challenging of Greenberg through the proto-conceptual work of Jasper Johns. Johns' 'Flag' paintings reintroduced subject matter as a way of showing that imagery could be used to manipulate and problematise form, in this case when an image of a flag coincided with the shape of a flag to dissolve the image into its own form. This kind of intellectual play with form led to the so called 'literalism' of Minimal Art, an absolutist engagement with flatness in painting or volume in sculpture that was also contextual and existential. It is at this moment that 'Blue Reflex' provides a bridge between the usefulness of formal considerations and truth to materials as it reaches towards the radical re-materialisation and phenomenological provocations of Conceptual Art.

Ian Burn, 'Blue Reflex', 1967.

Ian Burn trained as a painter at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, Australia and worked through early stages of figurative and geometric abstraction. He eventually abandoned painting in favour of glass and mirror-based constructions and then moving beyond any kind of object in favour of texts that examined the preconditions of art itself. He argued that for any work to be "conceptually germane", or "real", or "art",[5] it must confront and develop the discourse of art that sustains it. At the end of Ian Burn's career in the 1990s, his last stage involved a re-synthesis of text-based work and painting. His *Value Added Landscapes* were created by presenting his and other artists' amateur landscape paintings together with an overlay of textual statements that investigate the conventions of painting, uses of colour, and the act of perception itself.

All the artists in ABORA 3 are connected directly to the concerns of Ian Burn, or indirectly through the practices of postconceptualism. Postconceptualism, like postformalism and most other 'post-isms', exists in an agonistic relationship with that which it stands against, since the very name is defined by what it seeks to overcome or move beyond. By including conceptualism in its name, postconceptualism must refer back to conceptual art and be partially defined by it. Peter Osborne goes further saying that postconceptual art is not so much a particular type of art making but rather "the historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general."[6] Consequently that which comes after Conceptual Art, and refers back to it in some way or is influenced by it, can be called Contemporary Art. That which doesn't, which refers to art and ideas that precede the period of Conceptual Art, or denies it in some way, can be considered traditional or regressive and thereby not relevant to contemporary social relations.

This plays out in the second Ian Burn work that forms a key reference for ABORA 3, namely a work from the *Value Added Landscape* series titled 'A landscape is not... (1992). This work is a pigeon pair with another *Value Added Landscape*, 'Homage to Albert ("South through Heavitree Gap")' (1989) that uses the same textual statement but features a reproduction of a painting by Albert Namatjira. Both sourced paintings, one by the most famous Australian Indigenous landscape painter and the other by an anonymous (probably) non-Indigenous amateur painter, feature a gum tree in the foreground and a receding natural background through which the eye wanders and wonders. For Burn looking at paintings of Australian landscape was not something that stopped at an illusory surface but was an event that could make "unexpected demands on the competences of the viewer."[7] In an article titled "Namatjira's White Mask", co-written by Burn and Ann Stephens, Namatjira is interpreted as an indigenous artist working across two traditions, Western painterly landscape conventions and an Indigenous engagement with place as Country. They suggest his work is the classic example of intercultural dialogue that discloses a working complexity of cultural identities and realities. Burn appears to develop this idea as the contextual framework for 'Homage to Albert' (1989) using text that floats over Namatjira's watercolour 'South through the ranges, Heavitree Gap' (1952). The text "A landscape is not something you look at but something you look through" contrasts *Looking through* with *looking at* in the manner of two different visual, cultural and economic regimes. *Looking through* suggests a mode of engagement that is on the move, always ready to shift beyond typical resting places such as the horizon, painterly traditions and cultural modes. *Looking at* a landscape on the other hand suggests a visual engagement that is grasping and limited, that captures what is seen in the act of looking for the sake of rendering things static, measurable, conventional, serving an established marketplace of ideas and values. 'Value added' which Burn used to describe this series of works suggests an economic addition to the value of the work because of its intercultural exchange but also something that goes beyond, even transcends any of these kinds of limitations or easy interpretations of Namatjira's work. 'Value adding' as both an aesthetic and economic overlay in Namatjira's case might be something that needs to be peeled back[8] to reveal something that can't be shown because of an incommensurable distance between Country and other senses of mostly settler relations to place.

Ian Burn, 'A landscape is not …'. 1992.

Extrapolating from the two Ian Burn works in the show, 'Blue Reflex' and 'A Landscape is not …' we could say that the strategy of negation deployed in the earlier monochrome painting, abandoning any notion of skill and meaningful content, leads directly to a conceptual practice that is not just another way of working but a fundamental redefinition of art as such. 'A Landscape is not …' looks back across conceptual art to deploy it as an ontological challenge, not only to the medium based ideas of painting, sculpture, and photography, but as a way for artists to re-code artistic production as self-referential (art about art) and its ability to engage in broader cultural critique (art as activism). Consequently Burn's work suggests interpretative coordinates from formalism to postconceptualism that we claim today under the banner of 'contemporary' art. Contemporaneity is then the culmination of a journey from modern art, through formalism, reductivism, postformalism, minimalism, conceptualism, postconceptualism to find and found a particular relationality amongst them all. Postconceptualism in particular enables a striking multiplicity of practices with artists drawing from the deep pockets of modernist practices and conceptual interventions, nominating them, then subverting, hybridising, deconstructing and remediating them. The result is an active relation between social and theoretical practices that engage or critique the mediatized, networked, geopolitical phenomenon of transnational politics and globalised art.

Consequently ABORA 3 artists are exhibiting works that challenge the formality of form, the self-evidence of the essence of painting, sculpture, video, or any particular discipline, even the idea of transdisciplinarity. Instead there is a placing on view of work that disrupts the idea of art as any one thing that might be expressive, original, or essential. There is an interweaving of substrate, those hidden layers that apparently do no work but carry meaning or concept. We think of those underlayers as canvas or steel, or cloth and thread, pixel and monitor, or living bodies in time. Paradoxically in the journey from form to content, meaning and concept, those silent underlayers become the most expressive, even if they exhaust themselves in the act of expression, in the moment of producing an entirely new conceptual form. We might call this a revelation, as when the substrate of painting or any artistic discipline brings itself into conceptual form, into a post-medium condition. We are no longer solely focussed on the meaning-content of the work but the warp and weft, the moiré effect of its interweaving of form with an escape from form, of perceptual sensation and conceptual sense, where the form of presence has been pushed to the limit of a formant demand.[9] Here there is always an excess, something left over, left out as the "vestige of the unformed"[10] which in this case is the visual itself. In conceptual art and the process of conceptual reduction the visual is often dialled right down and in many cases subordinated entirely to intellectual processes antithetical to any type of illusionism or representation. The work of art becomes a kind of bracketing-off of any relation to the majority of art history that was primarily focussed on pictorial and depictive modalities. This resembles the philosopher's attempt to get closer to the matter at hand by reducing the number of variables in any act of perception to come to that which is invariant. If that attempt fails or proves to be impossible then we notice along the way all the levels and variations 'present' in the act of perception, and by analogy the 'work' of art, the act of putting something on view.[11] If we consider conceptual art as a kind of research into the nature of visuality and its residue in non-visuality, then postconceptual art would fulfil that project by being anti-research (play) at the edge of a proposition, crossing back and forth between informality and nonsense (un-sense). In that movement back and forth, both the boundary of artistic disciplines and the places of exhibition are crossed and problematised.

In the three instalments of ABORA 3, between Brisbane, Blue Mountains, and Sydney there has been a shift away from the white cube gallery to another (de) architecturalisation of art and its place of presentation. Each instalment has been in a domestic or academic environment marking different relations to the social organisation of space, in contrast to the almost non-space of a white cube gallery. In particular at UTS, ABORA 3 is taking place across four different environments; a white wall, a black space, a jumbo video screen and a tour of designated locations around the campus. The white wall displays primarily 2D works but with many declaring their trans-categoriality by leaning out from the wall into other dimensions. In the black space, mirrors and installational works abound together with performances and related talks by curators and artists. The jumbo video screen sits high on a two-storey wall crowning a foyer space made for passing through, for entering and exhibiting the building on the way to other destinations. The final 'space' is a tour that links selected historical works from the UTS Art Collection that are currently on display across two adjacent buildings. These are mainly shaped canvases and painted sculptures from the 1960s, that create a historical backdrop for formalism and postformalism, and a passage via the rest of ABORA 3 into a contemporary postformal postconceptual practice that is yet to properly named. Nietzsche captured the moment in an aphorism[12] that suggests metaphorically that we cross the ocean and reach distant islands at the extremity of our strength and abilities, and yet, as always, other birds will fly further!

Consequently the kind of practice on show in The 3rd Australian Biennale of Reductive Art is possible only because artists continue to take part in a worldwide reconsideration of what art can be in the wake of historical conceptualism and formalism, where all those previous movements become self-destructing corridors, a vanishing mediator,[13] through which we pass towards other hybrids of thinking, making and performing in the vicinity of the contemporary.

Mark Titmarsh
December 2023.

References

1. Other terms previously proposed by co-curator Billy Gruner are 'Post formalist' 'nonobjectform' and 'flat platform', where capitals, lowercase and spacing can indicate an entirely different perspective on the same word.

2. Tony Perrottet, "How Australia Put Evolution on Darwin's Mind", Smithsonian Magazine, 2015 https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/australia-put-evolution-darwins-mind-180953651/

3. Anonymous, "Forty fabulous facts about the UTS Tower", https://www.uts.edu.au/current-students/news/forty-fabulous-facts-about-uts-tower quoting "Stories from The Tower: UTS 1988-2013, Unfinished Symphony", Architecture Bulletin March/April 2012.

4. Clement Greenberg, Modernist Painting, 1960.

5. Ian Burn, "Conceptual Art as Art", *Art and Australia*, Vol 2, No 8, September 1970, 167.

6. Osborne, Peter (2013), *Anywhere or not at all: a Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London, Verso Books, 3.

7. Ian Burn, Looking at Seeing and Reading, Exhibition Catalogue, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, July 1993, 3.

8. Jonathan Kimberley, *Country Unwrapping Landscape: Kuluntjarra World Map (The Nine Collaborations)*, 2010, MFA Thesis, University of Western Australia.

9. As was done with the first generation of minimalism in the 1960s forcing Greenberg to declare, ""Minimal works are readable as art... a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art (but) that precisely is the trouble. Minimal Art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough of anything else."
In "Recentness of Sculpture", 1967, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed, Minimal Art.

10. Jacques Derrida, "Form and Meaning", in *Margins of Philosophy*, 172

11. Ian Andrews, "Sound and Phenomenology" in *Chance Phenomenology and Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury, London, 2021.

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak, Aphorism 575, "We aeronauts of the spirit."

13. Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art/and as Philosophy" in Philosophy in Cultural Theory, Routledge, London, 2000, 101.