

SOME MORE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW WITH MEL RAMSDEN

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Firstly, can you sketch out why you, Ian and Roger wanted to send work to the other end of the globe in 1969? Why do you think there was an opening up at this moment for working 'globally'?

I'm not sure whether I can sketch much out. In August 1969 Roger and I were both 24 years old. Ian was five years older and he had his head on straight – a five year difference is a lot when you are in your 20s. He knew a few Australian artists and artists from Melbourne. He had a lot of visitors when he lived London and in New York. Somehow he made contact with the Pinacotheca gallery. I don't remember the details. We put the work in the post and we had the show. We didn't think that much about working 'internationally' and certainly not 'globally'. Globalisation came along much later. That's not to say that Ian, for instance, didn't know the difference between New York City and Geelong. Four years later he would raise all this in the arguments about provincialism. But these arguments were critical of internationalism and concerned themselves with the relativity of contexts not the pulverising of detail by managerial dogma. So this show wasn't part of some cunning world plan except insofar as Conceptual Art (whatever that was or could be) was opening up certain distributional possibilities. You can put bits of paper in the post and these bits of paper were not secondary works. Roger and I were working as messenger boys at the UK Mission to the UN, Ian worked as a picture framer in East Harlem. We were not part of any university or any academic programme – we were not Harkness Fellows. Forty five years ago the world was technically and socially different. It was a long time ago. It would be entirely wrong to conscript this show to serve classifications like globalisation. We were pushing at the edges of

modernism to see what happened. That's what we thought it was all about. That's why the work was like it was and the show was when it was.

You first worked with Ian on *Soft-Tape* in 1966, and your next collaboration, if you can call it that, was Ian's text *Read Premiss* of 1969 written to accompany *Six Negatives*. Since then all your work has been part of Art & Language. Can you recall how much of a struggle it was in the late '60s to lose your sense of individual subjectivity in collaboration?

We (I mean Art & Language) frequently point out that all artistic work is collaborative in one way or another. We are saying that collaborative work is the norm and that artist's 'individual subjectivity' is a pragmatic mystification. (I don't need to point out to you that my answers to your questions are the fruit of a collaboration over forty years). We have long been aware that the artist as unique romantic individual is essential to the ever-expanding post-medium, post-Duchampian business presided over by the art fair and the biennale and endorsed by increasingly spineless academia. This is widely known. Art is now entrepreneurial, managerial and corporate and the seemingly paradoxical shibboleth of the romantic individual artist is in fact necessary to the transaction of its essentially conservative trade. But this image has been subject to some dismantling since the advent of Conceptual art – no, I don't mean Conceptual Art, I mean Art & Language. If the nature of 'the work' is, say, a written document, it's possible that the distinctions between artist, critic, historian, (etc.) and the edges of 'the work' become confused, unstable and harder to identify. The confusion is both a problem and an opportunity. In 1966 we didn't much understand any of this. Ian and I worked on *Soft-Tape* not as 'a work' in the conventional sense but as 'an exhibition', a kind of installation (a description unavailable at that time). So there wasn't the same identity of author-work. The *Six Negatives* book was in two parts, one part by Ian and another by myself. This was normal. When we worked on essays, we would hand them around for comments. It therefore seemed appropriate to have multiple authors. This sort of thing is conventional in many other disciplines. So, in answer to your question, it wasn't much of a struggle at all. But I don't want to make it seem that 'collaboration' is a big smiley face. One can get some nasty surprises occasionally.

You have described Conceptual art as 'modernism's nervous breakdown'. What signs of this 'disorder' are in the 1969 exhibition?

We wish we'd never said this. This remark was made at a conference on Conceptual art at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London in 1995. What we said is 'Conceptual art wasn't a style, it was more like modernism's nervous breakdown'. We wanted to link Conceptual art to some of the historical determinations of modernism and separate it from the Duchampian tradition, Fluxus, neo-dada, 'anti-art' or whatever. Maybe you could call the nervous breakdown 'a disorder'. It might be 'a disorder' to assert that a good deal of Conceptual art was terrible rubbish but that's just what was good about it. In this exhibition you might say that it was 'a disorder' that no familiar or redemptive aesthetic was presupposed. Instead we made use of photographic repetition and documentation – 'schematics and schedules' – which of course might be fragments of another kind of aesthetic. We employed the then fairly new technologies like Xerox copies and cheap photostats (all available at street level in New York). There was nothing particularly out of the ordinary about this. It was a 'look' fairly well on the go at the time. And I'm not sure any of us were really that sure that what we were doing might be called Conceptual art – we might have been more sure of the nervous breakdown bit...

In describing your work of this time you speak of 'facing up to the problems of the virtual and the literal.' Can you explain why this dialectical contradiction exerted so much hold over you in the late '60s? Does it still?

I'm not so sure this should be called a 'dialectical contradiction', and I am aware that some of this is very, very old hat. In the early to mid 1960s some conclusions were drawn from Frank Stella's black paintings of 1959–60. Some American artists made literal objects apparently free of any representational hang-ups. This is well trodden ground, from Michael Fried to the blank canvas, blah, blah. There were others, fully aware of the power of these works and indeed of the importance of the questions and the arguments that surrounded them, who wanted to preserve some form of the virtual in whatever implausible or beleaguered form. This led to the production of many compromised and uncertain works – often very bad

work. What isn't bad work is, for example, Ian's *Blue Reflex* paintings of 1967 and Michael Baldwin's *Untitled Painting (Mirror)* works. These were a solution to the problems of virtuality inasmuch as the reflections suggest a kind of aggravated virtuality made from what is most definitely a literal (blank) surface. The Conceptual art that eventually came to sit alongside all this was also not at all literal. Its text or written content gave the work a kind of odd virtuality. It's important to understand this. Conceptual art may have begun as an extreme continuation of minimalism but for us – and Art & Language – it quickly became its contradiction. Those who saw it and continue to see it as an extreme continuation of minimalism only saw and see dematerialisation, empty galleries 'as art', ideas 'as art' and other exaggeratedly pointless metaphysics.

And yes, we are still concerned with the many contradictory forms of representation and misrepresentation, and of what it might mean to fake, to disguise and to act things out – the possibilities of fiction.

Art Press, reproduced in this catalogue, was published by you, Roger and Ian in New York a month before the Pinacotheca exhibition opened. At the time how conscious were you about becoming curators and publishers of your own work?

Not 'conscious' at all. If we didn't publish it, nobody would. This wasn't about becoming our own curators and our own publishers. This was DIY. We bought a Gestetner mimeograph machine for \$115 and printed the whole thing ourselves. It was liberating.

Why do you think recreations – whether of individual works or exhibitions like this one or Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* – are now happening? What is at stake in such retrievals?

This is territory that has been gone over and over. There has been a massive expansion in the numbers of curators ever since the 1970s (due to the proliferation of institutions, degree courses etc., etc.). Since there have been for some time no technical requirements or limitations of medium to drive and to confine the production of art, artists have

become curators – entrepreneurial creatures with convenient access to corporate power. Many see this as the legacy of Conceptual art and many see this as a good thing, even as evidence of democratisation. Curators are interested in what other curators do. Curating has its own history. Curating has ‘critically minded curators’. Harold Szeemann is more significant than Barnett Newman. Management is on the move and this time it’s revolutionary and avant-garde. Contemporary art is administered. Curators (whatever they may be) are closer to this administration than artists (whatever they may be); exhibitions (whatever they may be or may have been) are more significant than works (whatever they may be or may have been). The latter are corporate identities that are easily digested by corporate and institutional interests and they fit into time lines and other convenient ‘historical’ containers. Presentational effects have replaced productive values. It’s hard to make much sense of any of this, it’s all so thrashed and trashed, perverted and barbaric (the more perverted and barbaric the better) that nobody really knows anymore – except the terminally trendy who always know everything.

Administrative power now has its own history and so its own ‘critique’ and ‘theory’. It’s ambitious. It’s busy ‘re-imagining museums’ and ‘re-thinking spectatorship’. As you say, there is currently an exhibition at Brooklyn Museum ‘recreating’ Lucy Lippard’s book *Six Years,* There is also a 300 page book in a series called ‘exhibition histories’ concerning itself with Lippard’s *Numbers Shows* from 1969–74. Now the editors argue that ‘rather than focus on artistic production they want an examination of art in the moment and context in which it is made public’. This seems quite to the point, even honourable – might even be interesting. There are many other aspects of contemporary art that are far worse than that – all the things available to every art student: self-curating, branding and self promotion. When curators look at art and see only more curating we have to question what is being spread and expanded – and expanded to the point where it’s almost impossible to see anything outside the goals of managerial power. In fact, some have recently suggested that the art world itself can best be understood not in Alfred Barr timelines but as the expanding amoeba-like thing in the 1958 film ‘The Blob’. The present exhibition obviously lives in this same stressful place.

1969 in New York was notable in several respects, the launch of Art Workers Coalition and several 'landmark exhibitions' like those at Finch College, *Language III* at Dwan and Seth Siegelaub's shows. At the time did those undertaken by Siegelaub seem the most interesting model for a new 'international' way of working for you and Ian?

I don't think at that time we were that aware of a Siegelaub 'model'. There was a lot of 'postal art' about – everything from Ray Johnson's New York correspondence school to Siegelaub catalogues, to funny journals and magazines. The idea that bits of paper could be transported without fuss, given away, reproduced, sent anywhere easily and informally kind of followed from the nature of the work and that work was process and project-like. This was against the severe monumentalism of previous ambitious art. Remember also the Dwan *Language III* show was in July 1969 organised by John Weber. That was all bits of paper and bits of paper in books. We knew what a show could look like. We showed John Weber *Six Negatives* in a ring binder. We thought it would be the only book in the show. There were about 50 others.

Or was it a bit different as you were exiles in New York, to start with?

Well, yes, we were 'outsiders' when we were in New York, but then there are a lot of outsiders in New York. But the three of us knew each other from London so there was a strange little gang and the Pinacotheca show was in part the result of this – and being a bit half-arsed.

There does seem quite a complex (confused, perhaps) and contradictory set of motives underpinning your '69 Pinacotheca show: your idealistic enthusiasm for new more democratic means of (to use Ian's term) 'decentralising' art distribution, side-by-side with a desire for avant-garde provocation, an assault on (Melbourne art world) expectations. How do you explain these conflicting aspirations?

Well, if I understand you and I'm not sure I do, there were three of us. Ian in particular had an eye on shoving it up the Melbourne art world with some hard core stuff from NYC. I can't remember any talk of democratisation or decentralisation. I can remember some talk about the mobility of the work and also some talk – perhaps prevalent at the time – of 'software'.

Did you and Ian make a deliberate decision to exhibit your most difficult/demanding work, eg no painting, not even from Ian any Systematically Altered Photographs, that might have been seen as Warhol Pop? Or did you conceive of the exhibition following on from your works in *The Field*?

No, we didn't make a deliberate decision to show difficult and demanding works. We just showed the most recent and most plausible body of work that could be easily put in the post and that ruled out more conventional object-like work.

Over '69 you both started publishing in earnest, *Art Press*, Ian's *Dialogue*, *Proceedings of The Society*, even your respective forays into Australia via the *Pinacotheca* magazine and *Art & Australia*. You also sent Pollard a set of 'announcements', what Pollard refers to as 'Mel's slips'. What were they? Did you get any follow up and did anything come of them?

I have no documentation or correspondence from Pollard or anything to do with this show. I must have had some but I don't anymore. 'Mel's slips'! I don't know what these were. I can't remember doing anything like this. I was a mad letter writer. My best effort of remembering would be that I may have sent Pollard announcements of shows in New York. That's the best I can do.

In one of numerous letters between Melbourne and New York, Pollard referred to the exhibition eliminating 'a time-lag', was this a familiar concept in New York?

No, it wasn't or rather it may have been but I don't think we were aware of it. Ian in particular was obsessed with the idea that because advanced modernity eventually dribbled down to Australia in a perverted form here was a show where they could get it NOW and right in their face. So I guess that was eliminating a time-lag.

Pollard, in describing his reaction to the '69 exhibition, wrote of *Six Negatives*, 'I was aware of a sort of black absurdity in such a presentation or scheme for a human personality.' What do you make of his stress on subjectivity, old fashioned existentialism or something astute?

Well, 'black' equals the romantic abyss. Was Reinhardt painting proto-minimalist paintings or was he the black monk of the sublime? Did he know? Do I know? The fact is I wasn't in the slightest bit interested in existentialism which was then seen as arty bullshit. That of course doesn't mean to say that I didn't somehow fall into it. The fact that you were left with only the negative words of Roget was part of the scheme working with or connecting to the fact that the work was made into a negative Photostat which in those days you had to have made first in order to have a positive Photostat. Read *Read Premiss*. I think Pollard was just trying to make sense of the work in his own perhaps rather 'refined' terms.

Following the '69 show you and Ian proposed a second show, though your ideas changed rapidly over the following year until you finally settled on the exhibition of IB/MR collected works. Was it shown elsewhere? Did the hostile response shock you both? How do you understand the shift in local reception, from the initial enthusiasm from Bruce Pollard for difficult, challenging shows at Pinacotheca that by 1971, changes to outright reaction to analytical art.

Well, the first show at Pinacotheca contained objects which, however unsatisfying, could still be seen as having boundaries and be somehow contemplated. The second show was not really gallery orientated at all. The show was beside the point. You didn't need it. All the work was internal to the books. There was nothing really to look at. You had to read and follow connections. I think this was a bit of a let-down which is understandable. I can remember a kind of resentment or righteousness creeping in. They thought we were just getting too pretentious and smart-arsed and that we were not fooling them and that we needed taking down a peg or two. They were right. This wasn't proper philosophy and it wasn't proper art.

Is then the real story of early Concept art and Australia one of hostility and not as Terry Smith suggests 'a new typology of locations... succeeding the metropolitan ties of modernism... expanding and decentering the canon.'?

'A new typology of locations' and 'expanding and decentering the canon'. Wow! I think the work was just regarded as pretentious and not worth bothering with. I don't think the hostility you mention was unique to Australia. As I'm writing this I'm talking to Michael [Baldwin] and he's getting questions about the 1969–71 Art-theory course at Coventry. The Art & Language Art-theory course was suppressed by administrative power in 1971. This same power is now celebrating it. There's recently been available a PhD at Coventry University called 'Art & Language and After'. Both this course ('the famous Art & Language art-theory course') and the Pinacotheca exhibition ('the first Conceptual Art show in Australia') have turned into heritage. Neither of us feels vindicated as a lot has happened to confuse and to complicate the last 45 years. There are many whose interests are served by tidying everything up into self-serving memory or half-true slogans like the ones you mention. There are no curatorial laurels on which we want to rest.

No laurels, but the 1969 Pinacotheca show continues to have an unsettling residue that is productive. Perhaps it's the perceptual challenges more associated with painting, like the internal complexity of *Six Negatives* or the obstinate focus of the *Xerox Books*? What do you think?

You're right. The works in this show are modest objects. They might be 'conceptual' in certain ways: as I say, in their modesty, in the use of a kind of grunge photography, in the book form, in the presence of language and of lists. On the other hand (perhaps), all the works were located somehow within a kind of 'crafted' internal coherence most familiar from modernism, from the medium and the making of paintings. It's just that in 1968–69 it didn't seem like that – a few Xerox copies, some photographs and photostats, didn't seem like 'painting' in the least. The 'unsettling residue' you speak of is not quite paradoxical, it's just that the work was not completely Duchampian. I refer you to what you mentioned earlier, that is, to the disorders of modernism's nervous breakdown. But I understand that you are making a significant point. There is indeed a residue – although I don't know if I'm unsettled by it. These works are not merely entrepreneurial. They are not clean and tidy. They are in the shadow of all sorts of things – none of them very 'conceptual' if you consider the ideal form of conceptual art as a readymade plus administration.