

SNO 106

Returning to the Field

July 13 to August 24 2014

“A language-game: Report whether a certain body is lighter or darker than another. – But know there’s a related one: State the relationship between lightness of certain shades of colour. (Compare with this: Determining the relationship between the lengths of two sticks – and the relationship between two numbers.) – The form of the propositions in both language-games is the same: “X is lighter than Y”. But in the first it is an external relation and the proposition is temporal, in the second it is an internal relation and the proposition is timeless.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein – Remarks on Colour

The ideas for this exhibition are based on two main beliefs. Firstly, we want to trace the history and the critical distance that new formalist abstraction in Australian art has undertaken since 1968. The second objective is to position in this trajectory of ‘abstract’ art, a set of contemporary counterpoints that re-address some of the aspects and outcomes created by both the artists and curators at the National Gallery of Victoria at that time. The desire to do so is about renewal, understanding that artists in the decades that follow The Field have taken up and been present alongside many new mediums and approaches to the making of art.

By setting out with these two different inflections, SNO hopes to arrange a set of critical signposts that will be evident in the works presented by the selected 14 artists. We wish to signal a critical position that enables speculation about how an exhibition of formalist abstract art can, in a collective sense, resonate in our current contemporary art context. We began thinking about the exhibition primarily from the position of artists, our curatorial aim to work directly with artists in a form of consultation which in reality exists in a series of lively conversations, animated phone communications and emails and messages that convey information that has enhanced the direction, modality and nuanced outcomes one can only fully grasp and experience by physically entering the exhibition space.

SNO thanks all the artists for making time to meet with us. It is their participation in this valuable process that has ensured the lively outcome for those who come to the gallery. SNO is also indebted to the various commercial art dealers representing both The Field artists and the 7 invited respondent artists. Both Amanda Rowell of The Commercial, and Charles Nodrum Gallery have made considerable efforts to support SNO 106, loaning works from their personal collections and stockrooms and assisting us with transport, documentation as well as their own invaluable insights. SNO visited Casula Powerhouse recently to view the Wendy Paramor estate, and we are thrilled to have on loan the Paramor modular sculpture, Triad (1967) as part of Returning to The Field exhibition.

A lot has happened in Australian art during the forty eight years since the water-shed exhibition “The Field” opened the new National Gallery of Victoria, in that exceptional late modernist building that was designed by architect Roy Grounds. Curiously many of The Field artists, did not maintain ‘the field project’ of reductive abstraction fully. We carefully considered the group and decided really that only Robert Hunter has maintained his extended mission. Some of the artists are unknown to us today, but numerous of the group of 40 have had distinguished exhibiting careers. A good many of the artists also had other lives in art education. For what followed on from 1968 was a different revolution with the development of the new university style art schools, and a whole generation of students with a direct or indirect acquaintance with neo-formalism and non-objective art. Perhaps this

pedagogical aspect of post-Field influences is yet to be fully researched in relation to the work of contemporary artists working today. This has certainly been one of the significant points of structural transmission of form pointing to a broader field, and one that we might continue to refer to as the tendency of shared stylistic principles or locate in altogether other modalities.

Since 1968 a whole raft of media and sensibilities have come on to the stage. Since this time an entirely new visual language has absorbed society through the many new kinds of media transmissions. Conceptual art, new media art, environmental and performance art, installation, new photography, video and sound art, cross-cultural art, Aboriginal art, Post-colonial, and other forums such as art-spaces and artists-run-initiatives have emerged that have partly evolved outside the restrictive exclusivity and prescriptiveness of the major art galleries and museums context. Given the radical environment for the new art, one question worth considering is how formalism today engages in this new and broadening spectrum ?

On examination of the documentation generated since "The Field" - we have been thinking about the many impacts and trends that might have influenced the new forms of abstraction of '68. There are fleeting references to popular culture and design of the 60s, having an effect directly on some of the artists. In discussions with the members of SNO we contemplated how more generally the architecture, urban design and the built environment of the 60s and how these must have affected the outlook and thinking of those involved in the plastic arts. The modular formwork that Utzon experimented with on building the Sydney Opera House might be one such example, and the numerous influential visits to Australia by the architectural maverick Richard Buckmaster-Fuller is perhaps another useful sign-post. Architectural and civic forms of art are intrinsically linked to the thinking of artists of SNO's generation of non-objective artists as it undoubtably was for the artists back in 1968.

Much has been written about the international trends that The Field artists experienced. These dynamics in varied and different ways has effect on both those who had migrated to Australia, or the Australians who travelled abroad to Europe and America to study or expand their early exhibition practice and life experiences. In retrospect, many of the artists of the 60s remained or soon returned to Australia (unlike the generation of Boyd and Nolan). The 60s saw "the emergence of a modernising liberalism" in the different discourses of the day. It seems clear to us that the idea of living in a new country had significantly changed the national emphasis to issues around the metropolitan centres and the emerging cosmopolitanism society in these cities. In part, it is that sort of urbane confidence which is observable in the art specifically from the 60s, and then beyond. Partly this renewed energy and sense of place gifted the next generation of artists the self-assuredness and critical platforms where artists could maintain and explore their practices under local conditions.

In an earlier research exhibition SNO 61, (mounted in collaboration with the curator of Macquarie University collection), we began to examine works by artists from Sydney's Central Street Gallery. Here we noticed other significant influences. How was the art of the day affected directly or indirectly by a other new media and language in a related approach to advertising and electronic media and print? Tony McGillick, John White and Harald Noritis, who were the founding directors of Central Street Gallery, made a living by working at the forefront of commercial advertising and art direction. This was a period when it was more common for fine artists to practice in commercial design, far more so than it is today. As an early example of the white-cube artists-run-space Central Street was pivotal in promoting and fashioning abstraction and non-objective art (1966-70). Such examples of influence we have thought of as part of an 'expanded Field'. Further, it interests us to see in this current exhibition examples of works where the "The Field" artists (such as Nigel Lendon and Gunter

Christmann), shift from painting and sculpture, to experimentation in sound and video and other modes of temporal art and performance.

One artist of “The Field” we began researching but have not included in this exhibition, is the expatriate Michael Nicholson. Nicholson, the oldest of The Field artists was born in the UK in 1916. Since the early 1970s he began to explore and design music-video as an expanded form of colour field painting. In 2015 SNO plans to mount another exhibition relating to music and architecture, called The Graphic Score, where we hope to present Nicholson’s most recent integrated video and sound works. We get the sense that performance and minimalism related to a field of contact and that was what confronted the audiences in a unique way. For the first time autonomous art objects existed without external referential points of reading. Here the action of viewing, of looking onto the work, and how that experience and way of seeing being contained by the object itself was to form a field of virtual engagement.

The selection of 7 non-Field artists provides this current exhibition with a stage where a set of artistic correspondences can be observed. The aim is to create a new relationship, a new series of conversations between artists of different generations, and between the mediums they employ and examine the ideas they perform using various reductive abstract systems. The productive outcome of these juxtapositions explores some of the claims of the original curators, that within an atmosphere created collectively of shared visual systems, the audience is able to recognise visual meanings from the space in-between. In the SNO exhibition the way the work has been arranged together is very different to the idealism of a perfected and isolated reception often found in a museum with grand white and clinical spaces. Our current ensemble remarks on the close inter-relationship of each work assembled in the 5 modestly sized rooms of the SNO Centre. Our selection process has exploited this function of confluences by arranging a set of cross thought-lines. Each of the artist’s works is inadvertently amplified by a counter-reference and that kind of experience of seeing forms in space could be said to be a more immersive one.

Tracing the space in-between: What we observe in the present SNO 106 exhibition are a set of internal similes which have been described as artistic counterpoints. Contained in a series of chambers these groupings constitute an ensemble form. We propose this combination to be specifically performed in the present situation but, there is no reason to think that this is definitive of a single curatorial intention and we could construct yet another carefully formed selection (works relating to The Field archive), to perform an entirely other affect in the future. In the process we considered that the spatial drawing of the window or portal that gives the sense of the space beyond (the grid and the field) seen in the works by Vicker’s *De Lacy VIII*, Johnson’s *Frontals* and Christmann’s *Untitled, 1969* correspond to similar actions observed in the spatial drawing-collages of Rose *Monumental I & II* and the two Eastaway canvases *Rough Yellow I & II* with their astonishing treatment of the peripheral zones. Sculptural forms relating a specific condition of a space contained within, as seen in the works by Lendon such as *Black Hole (in 27 cubes)* and the recently conceived *Untitled Drawing (Elasticus)*, a performance-for-video, echo through the void found in the four wall reliefs *Untitled (4 parts)* of Redgate or the linear devices seen in the string sculpture *Majka* by the East Arnhem Land artist Ngurruwuthun. In each of their works we might find that their visual conditions remark on the perimeters of expectation. The refracted space construed by repeated line and form in the constellations of both Jacks and Ball have their correspondence with the geometric progressive blocks in painting *Dazzle Camouflage* by Dawes. There are other counter positions of reflective spaces, using mirrored elements that appear to dissolve from the inside or outside as in Paramor’s painting *Geometric* and her sculpture *Triad* or Johnson’s *Frontals* and the photographic work *Straightcut 27* by Redgate. The materiality that we observe in the grids and anti-grids in the concrete poem and the sound work of Christmann’s called *Eine Seite Text*, or forms-in-painting in Idien’s *Blue*

Yellow, and the painted modules of Ball's *Infinex Lumina* and the octagon painting *L.O.C.* by Wright form a base on which the combination of all other forces that constitutes the installation might rest upon. In a sequence of aphoristic statements made by Ian Burn in 1993 attempting to define 'seeing, looking, perceiving . . .' he speaks about a self-consciousness that does not just reference the 'between-ness' of viewer and object; significantly, it produces also a 'space' between what we **see** and what we **know** which is capable of complex (re)working . . . as intersection, tension, contradiction, paradox, discontinuity, etc. In this way the ensemble we have threaded together at SNO based as it is on an index of kinds manages to install cross-lines and this abstractly facilitates the viewer experience.

In 1968 John Stringer, the chief exhibition officer at the National Gallery of Victoria, was entrusted primarily to develop a temporary exhibition called *The Field*, for the opening of the new gallery building on St Kilda Rd. The Trustees of the NGV made arrangements for this innovative temporary exhibition to tour to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The NGV 's careful curatorial statement signalled that a departure was underway and *The Field* would be unlike the past major exhibitions at the Gallery which tended to be historical in structure; saying that this exhibition would not be impartial or comprehensive and opt instead to be biased in order to define one particular direction taken up by contemporary artists of the day. It was to concentrate on 'abstractionists' and would be restricting itself to a specific aspect "which one is reluctant to define by terminology". In this brief curatorial note Stringer and the curator of Australian Art Brian Finemore made reference to "hard edge, unit pattern, colour field, flat abstraction, conceptual and minimal" art.

The exhibition was designed to encourage viewers to come to their understanding of these open-terms of abstraction through what the Gallery referred to as 'a collective association' approach, this kind of experience being possible it was believed because of the artists shared stylistic principles. The curators accepted that the artists operated in a broad area of concerns and had 'quite distinct attitudes' and so it was not possible to call this specific aspect of abstraction a movement. Already the curators recognised that some of the artists whose work had been selected, were already moving towards different artistic forms, and directions or modalities. Yet the curators wished to consider '68 the moment in time, for both its uniformity and variety.

The Field turned out to be a watershed event for Australian contemporary art. Also the NGV acknowledged that part of the understanding of the trends exhibited was due to importing works to Australia made by numerous Australian artists who were then living overseas. The rest of the artists were selected from just 3 Australian metropolitan areas. The Gallery was looking outside the confined influence of a literary and narrative art championed in the two decades before, and surely must have rejected Bernard Smith's claim that, "Certainly the non-figurative arts can express mood and attitudes, but they are not capable of producing a new artistic language". Perhaps with those words in their minds the NGV simply claimed the exhibition represented a development. In this the curators acknowledged that there was not a movement of non-objective art, yet there were attitudes and shared stylistic principles viewed from a collective moment in time. Even so, however new and progressive the curators claimed it to be, of the 40 artists selected for *The Field* there were only three women. For the times this was hardly new! Nor were there any Australian Aboriginal artists represented. Yet it was a genuinely intergenerational and cosmopolitan show with a span of 31 years, with artists born between 1916 and 1947.

By returning to the works by artists of *The Field* SNO has hoped to form an exhibition curated in consultation with the artists themselves. Ideally, the notion of adjusting ideas that

critique aspects of the original exhibition, can be achieved by thinking independently outside of the major art institutions and outside of the fashionable main stream art scene and the immediate pressures of the art collector market. 30 years ago the artists Lendon and Burn in their collaborative essay *Purity, style, amnesia* published in *The Field Now* catalogue at Heide, speculated on what the major legacy of the event of 1968 brought to Australian art, "The rhetoric of 'the new' and the 'logic' of an institutionalised avant-garde were legitimised by The Field exhibition and subsequently reproduced in the survey exhibitions, project shows and biennales, in the acceptance of the idea of an avant-garde by the major institutions, in the Australia Council, and in the collecting policies of the Australian National Gallery. To concentrate therefore on the 'look' of the exhibition is misleading. Rather, the institutional sponsorship of an 'avant-garde' context for contemporary art in Australia was itself the major initiative of The Field." We hope that in Returning to The Field this exhibit will be like an incubator or think-tank in the eyes of the new and emerging generation of artistic thinkers who come to view it. We certainly are attempting to create collectively and historically a kind of new atmosphere. A lot has changed in Australian art in 48 years since The Field opened in Melbourne. With a touch of the ironic, SNO hopes that this exhibition - by the act of Returning - will renew ideas and that additional artistic strategies will now emerge, creating reactions and renewed responses outside the current academic comfort zone. In saying that, through our research we have discovered numerous threads taken up by the original artists since 1968 and these partly echo in the works by the 7 invited respondent artists. Exhibitions such as this one we feel set-up very useful coordinates, some that will renew the language of abstraction, and others that might expand the field altogether in related directions. The artists associated with SNO consider all the events and exhibitions we design as being part of a series of experimental pilot projects, bringing language, performance and sound works into close proximity to the kinds of visual art that we practice. We hope that this exhibition stimulates further exhibitions and critical writing about contemporary non-objective art and the artists that make it.

Like The Field SNO has maintained a more or less unfixed definition of formal abstraction, but as John Stringer observed in 1968 - owning a shared stylistic principle concerning non-objective art - is the best way to view things.

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