

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT.
Six attitudes in Australian Art.



78.6 40

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT.
Six attitudes in Australian Art.

N
7404
.W926
1978

Louise Sloss Ackerman Library
SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT.
Six attitudes in Australian Art.

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT.
Six attitudes in Australian Art.

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT.
Six attitudes in Australian Art.

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT.
Six attitudes in Australian Art.

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT.
Six attitudes in Australian Art.

This exhibition which was proposed by Grazia Gunn and Lynn Hershman is funded by the Visual Arts Board.

Members, Visual Arts Board of the Australian Council 1978.

Elwyn Lynn A.M. Chairman

Michael Shannon Deputy Chairman

John Andrews

Tony Bishop

Guy Grey-Smith

Jonathan Holmes

Michael Meszaros

Nancy Underhill

Leon Paroissien Director

Noela Yuill Senior Project Officer for
"THE WORK & ITS CONTEXT"

Six Attitudes in Australian Art.

THE WORK AND ITS CONTEXT. Six attitudes in Australian Art.

The title of the cover picture is "Souvenir of Woop Woop". In Australia Woop Woop is a name given to a place in the middle of nowhere, geographically cut off from the rest of the world, intractable, deprived. Some may have said that until recently the whole of Australia was Woop Woop. But with recent technological advances the networks of communication have been extended to reach if not the whole country, certainly the main centres. Many outside influences have infiltrated; geographical location is no longer a handicap, the world has come to Woop Woop, and Woop Woop is becoming part of the world. Even in the past, international "isms" were eagerly applied in an effort to irrigate the provincialism which for a long time plagued most forms of creative activity and particularly art. Now, in the seventies, a more relaxed attitude is evident, the novelty of the "international connection" has subsided, a new awareness is emerging. Artists have found the confidence to be Australian, there is a subtle and sometimes transient link to the environment. They see themselves as part of a pluralistic society, whose values and standards are common to other societies. Having broadened their horizons, they can now more comfortably accept the *a priori*, and plug in to the energy of a particular place as a regenerating process. Art may be universal, but the most potent art reflects a sense of place: this is where I work, this place is the one I know best.

The six artists represented in the current exhibition do not by any means represent the full spectrum of vital art in Australia at the present time. But their works show interesting comparisons as well as sharp oppositions. Some are more obviously iconoclastic, others rework established aesthetic ideas in new terms. In some cases the dimensions of the work extend into the environmental and/or social context, in others the context is completely embodied in the work itself.

Kerrie Lester uses real objects in a synthesis of symbols of a consumer society. Her works are assemblages of ready-mades which reflect a particular urban sensibility. In becoming part of the art-work everyday objects are transformed, their inherent significance made more acute. In a sense her work is autobiographical, it is emotive and evocative.

Sam Schoenbaum, a post object artist, exhibited in 1975 a piece called "One year's work", a journal of his daily activities over a period from November 1973 to November 1974. The piece deals with the rituals of life. The emphasis of his work is on creating order out of chaos. He has made a number of video tapes, he lectures and does performance pieces. Reading the text is part of the performance which is structured around the interplay of two performers. The pieces reveal a continuous questioning process — is there such a thing as a work of art, independent of context? — what are the factors involved in definition? — and so on. In his latest work, the emphasis is on communication through the written word. He is also writing music in a form called graphic partiture, which means the composition is given to the artist as a picture rather than music composed for different instruments, thus creating a relationship between the composer and the performer. This sort of performance deals with the organization of space, movement and time. His exploration of communication through written formats is evident in the piece "Engagement/Disengagement", where the text is a compilation of love letters.

In Gunter Christmann's work the environment predominates. His concern for the natural and the artificial elements in the environment goes back to 1971, when he first started to make slides of the chance arrangement of natural or man-made objects lying on the ground. Each of the eighty slides represented fragments of an environment which he then projected on to a painted screen in Berlin in 1973. This piece is the first of a continuing research into his environment, and is the basis for his later work, which directly relates to the selected fragments of natural or artificial elements. Confined within a frame, the fragments activate associations with landscape or focus on intimate, fragile, or discarded objects.

In his more recent paintings the interaction between natural and artificial elements is accentuated. The paintings come in series, the order and sequence of each work make the structure of the idea and its development more visible. His other work, a taped sculpture, being sound, is part of the environment and like the paintings it is an interaction of natural and artificial order. The sounds heard are: traffic noises and the ritualistic and structured repetition of a jew's harp.

Richard Dunn's work is about procedures, the medium's inherent qualities and scale. He reiterates structural elements, never exhausting their possibilities. The work is cross-referential, each part is read in sequence. The materials used for the selected piece in the current exhibition are metal and paper, in antithesis. The eye is jolted back and forth from the shimmering metal to the opacity of the paper, from the repellent to the absorbent, from the cold to the hot, the visual echo of the red earth so common in the Australian landscape.

Paul Partos works within certain chosen limits. The quintessential character of his work is in the interaction of the absolute and the particular, the painting, and the place which becomes part of the work.

Marr Grounds and Paul Pholeros "Sculpture at the Top Ends", is a series of subtly articulated structures, a sequence of transitional works, each one applied to suit the particular context. The works, juxtaposed to features of a landscape, create coactive relationships and become part of it. Using readily available local materials, the works belong to the "place"; no element is transposed, the structures applied are appropriate to the landscape, accentuating the

enormous scale of the "bush" environment and creating ephemeral and ethereal visions which challenge the necessity of a permanent presence. Unprotected from natural elements they exist temporarily. Grounds and Pholeros have added to the dimension of the piece, the interaction between a general creative input, that of the community, and the particular contribution input of the artist. Shown graphically in the different context of a gallery, the piece becomes a documentation process, photographs and drawings explain each work. The video shows a series of events performed within a topographical context, images are transposed, but remain intangible like shadows cast into the landscape. The ethnicity of this piece is very significant: it refers to the uniqueness of the Australian landscape and to a particular vast stretch of country, the Northern Territory. The work consists of a totality of elements which evoke the character and reflect the spirit of an undomesticated terrain, a rugged stretch of bush — somewhere in "Woop Woop".

Grazia Gunn

Kerrie Lester

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1953 Born Sydney
 1971-1974 Student; National Art School
 1973-1974 Group Exhibition, Cell Block, Darlinghurst
 1974 Exhibition, Centrepoint Art Prize
 1975 Student; Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education; Exhibited 'Three Younger Artists Show', Bonython Galleries; Represented Philip Morris Collection Student Exhibitions; Sydney Opera House Cambridge House
 1976 Exhibited 'Young Contemporaries Show', Hogarth Galleries; Georges Invitation Prize; Exhibited 'Apocalypse Show', Hogarth Galleries; One Woman Show, Hogarth Galleries; 'Women in Society Show', Hogarth Galleries; 'Artists for Whitlam', Hogarth Galleries
 1977 One Woman Show, Hogarth Gallery
 1978 Young Painters; Macquarie Galleries; Georges Invitation Art Prize, Melbourne; Young Contemporary Society, Paddington Town Hall. Drawings; Macquarie Galleries in conjunction with the Contemporary Drawing Show at the Art Gallery of N.S.W.

SELECTED REFERENCES

1975	Daily Mirror, June 19 Sunday Telegraph, December 14 Sydney Morning Herald, December 11 Sunday Telegraph, June 22 Australian, December 31 Cleo Magazine, April Edition Sunday Telegraph, July 18 Sunday Telegraph, May 9 Sunday Telegraph, July 11 Jewish Times, May 11 Australian, May 13 Jewish Times, July 22 Daily Mirror, May 3 Australian, July 12 Jewish Times, May 20 Sydney Morning Herald, June 15 Australian, November 15 Sunday Telegraph, November 13 Sunday Telegraph, September 18 Sydney Morning Herald, September 27 Australian, Thursday, September 29 Sunday Telegraph, September 18 Australian, December 31 Sydney Morning Herald, January 28 Australian, Saturday 28
1976	
1977	
1978	

GRANTS

1977 Visual Arts Board Grant

Kerrie Lester

Kerrie Lester's art works are unique in Australia. Using objects of industry and everyday articles found in the average household, Lester weaves, stitches, quilts, pastes and stretches her materials into compositions of startling simplicity and boldness.

"My work", she says, "cannot be labelled as either painting, drawing, sculpture or weaving — it is an interplay of mediums, in which I relocate objects to make a statement."

Ms. Lester's statements are often satiric, many times amusing and on occasion political.

"Art itself, the art of life promises a whiter wash," remarks Ms. Lester somewhat elliptically.

While Ms. Lester's art cannot be considered feminist, the works nevertheless often convey or project the awareness of domestic life. Flour bags, tomato sauce boxes, vinyl household tiles, spoons, food, buttons, clothes labels and washing powder boxes have all been used in her works.

"I am intrigued with found objects," explains Ms. Lester, "with the mass produced rubbish. I make my art from things that people relate to as surrounding and not realised as art. I make satires on society and satires on myself."

'Souvenir of Woop-Woop' would have to be considered Lester's master work to date. The word 'Woop-Woop' has the same connotation in Australia as Timbuctoo does in American slang. Using red, white and blue prize show ribbons, Lester makes a large map of Australia and stitches it onto a background of gaudy tourist tea-towels. Covering the whole quilted-like surface with plastic Union Carbide bags, in a Rauschenbergian gesture, Ms. Lester adds the finishing touch — a border of souvenir pennants and shiny platinum spoons. It is a dashing pop-inspired work of enormous invention and unusual freshness.

Despite Ms. Lester's use of junk and found objects, her arrangement of forms is immaculate, often crisply geometric and somehow, almost pristinely classical. Unlike many 'junk-artists', there is never any sense of clutter or confusion, accident or

haphazardness. She makes her point — ecological, social or political, with a minimum of fuss — cleanly with a sabre-like thrust.

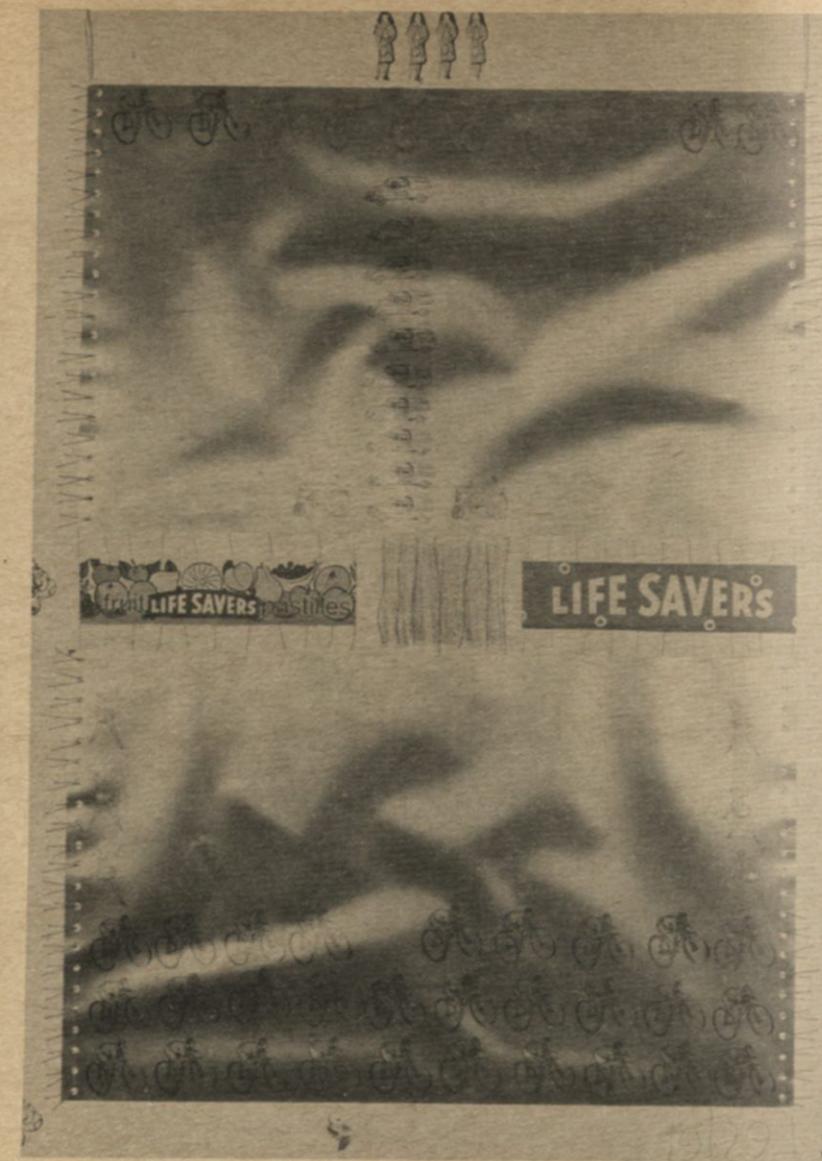
"I like," she says, "soft, touchable objects, not untoouchable hard icons."

Kerrie Lester was born in Sydney in 1953 and studied at the National Art School from 1971 to 1974. From her first appearance on the art scene in 1973, Lester was declared one of Australia's most promising young artists. She captivated the critics with works such as 'The Zoo', a hessian and aluminium work, on which she carved or stitched the names of 300 animals; 'Blue Rinse', a large work which utilised Rinso boxes' 'Sack-Kerr', a witty political piece composed of flour bags and graffiti, and, in more recent times, 'Sailing Fans and Beer Cans', a comment on an Australian way of life.

"I try not to be influenced by other artists", Lester states. Perhaps that's what makes her art so unique — she really isn't!

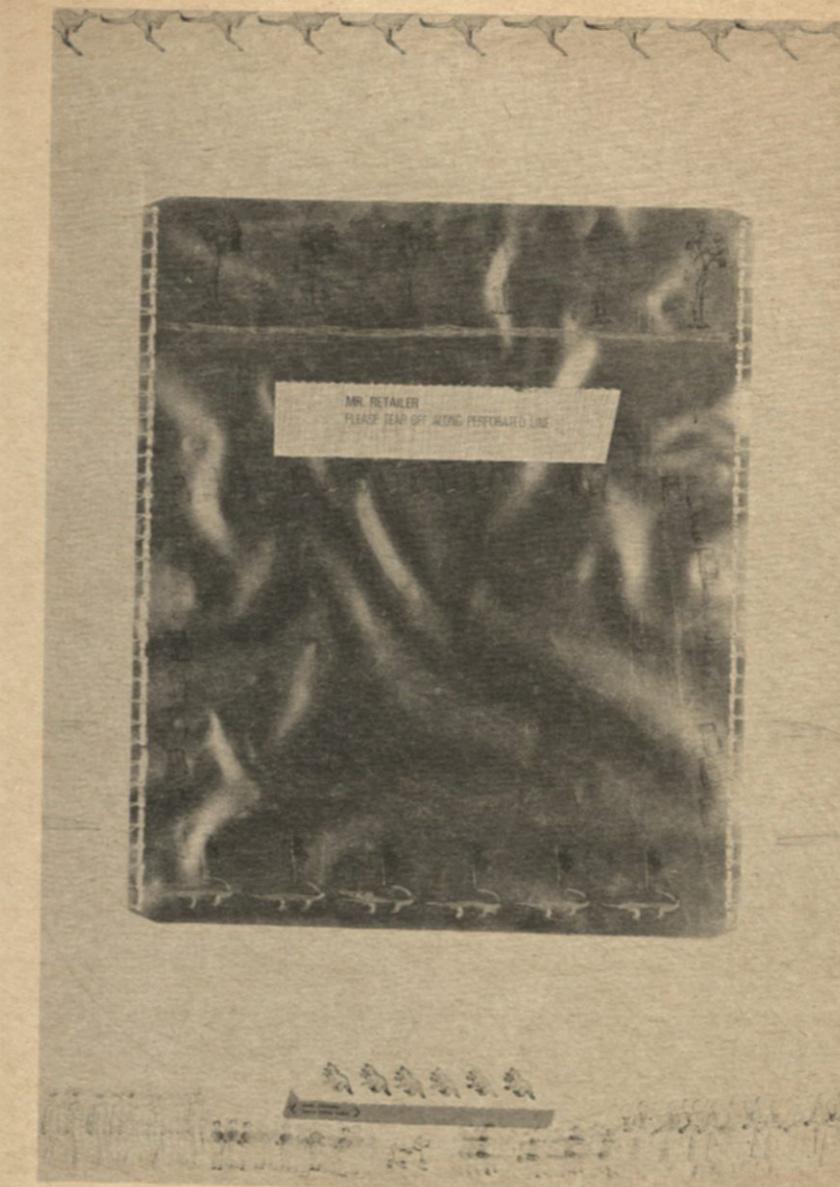
Sandra McGrath

Kerrie Lester

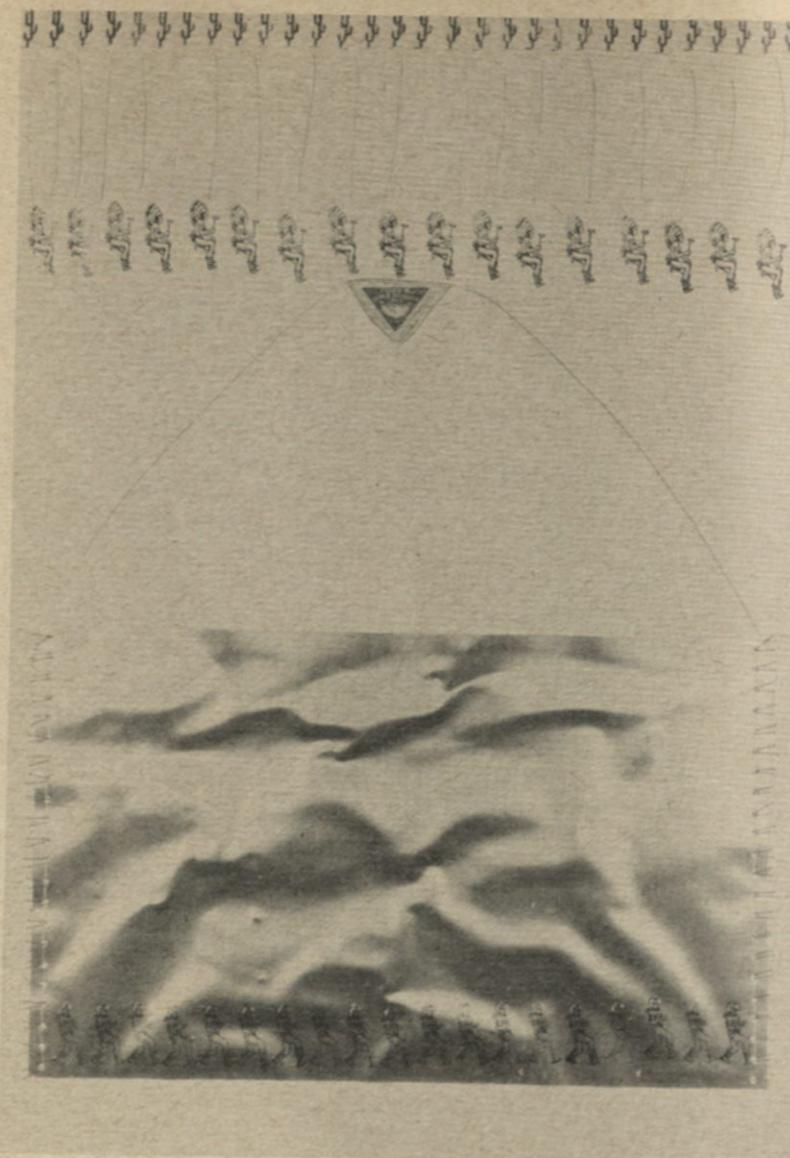


Life Savers
Paper, lithoplate and rubber stamps
79.5 x 60 cm.
Lent by Hogarth Galleries, Sydney

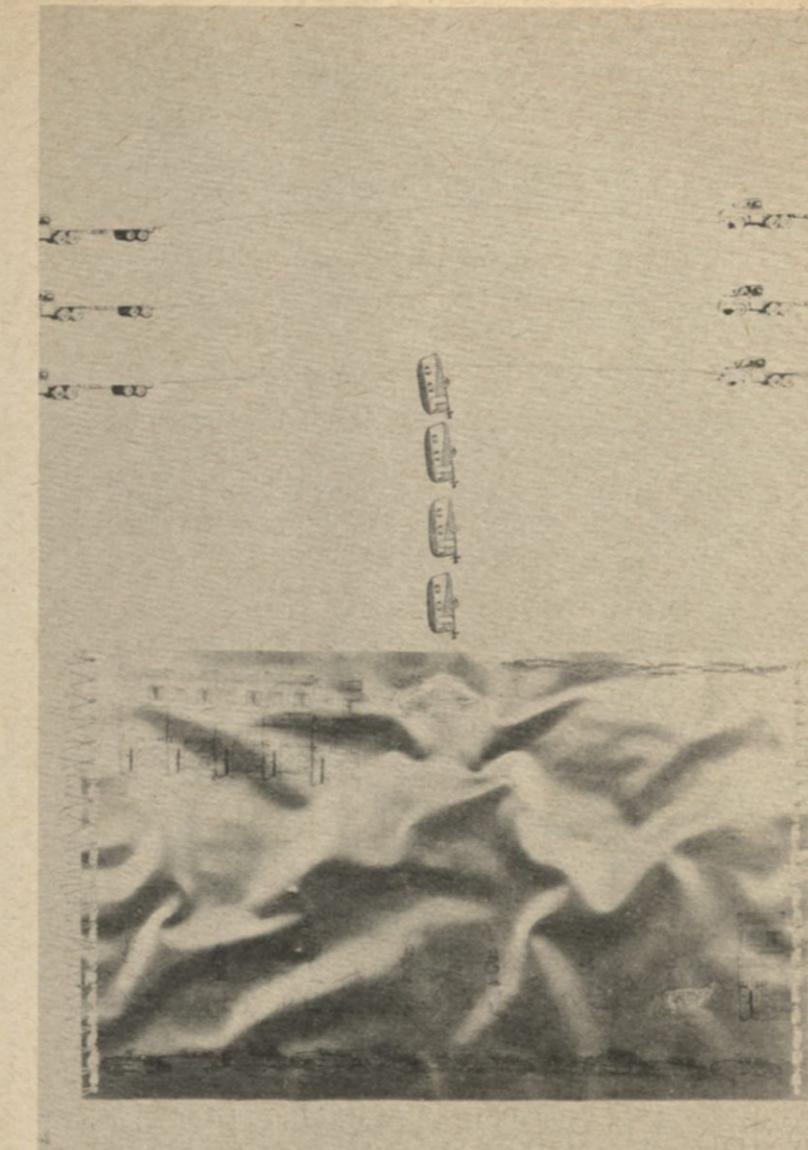
Kerrie Lester



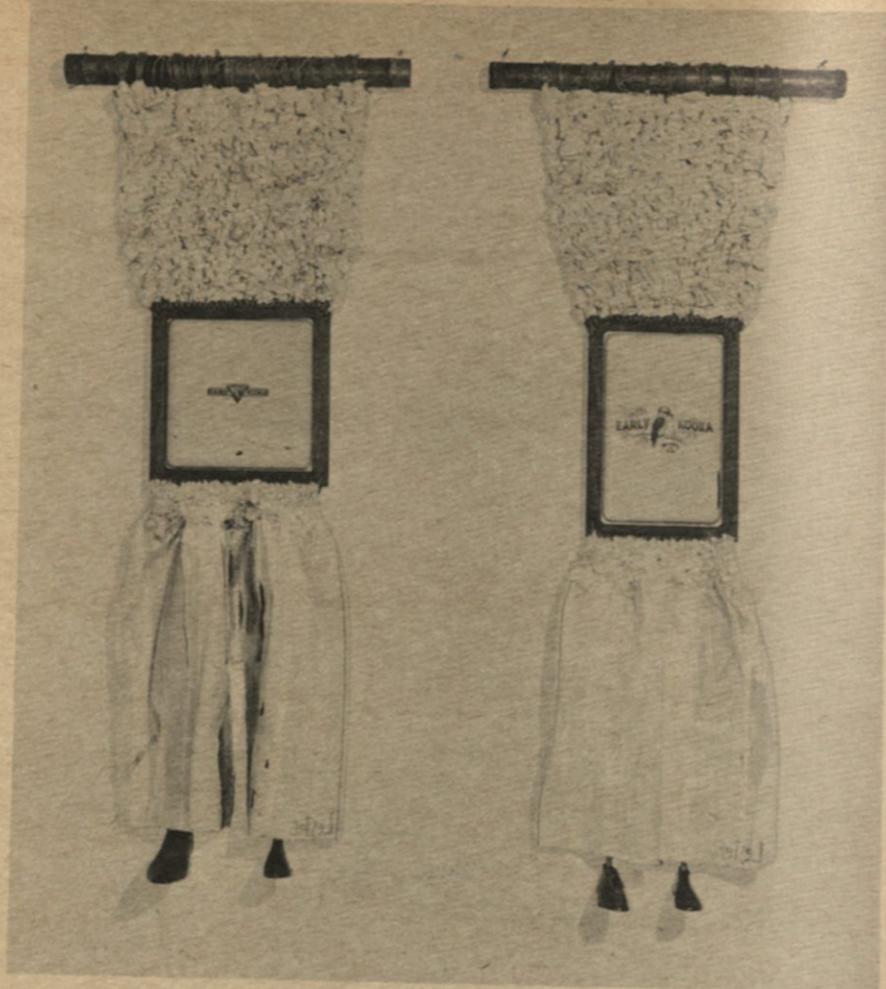
God Save The Trees
Paper, lithoplate and rubber stamps
79 x 59.5 cm.
Lent by Hogarth Galleries, Sydney



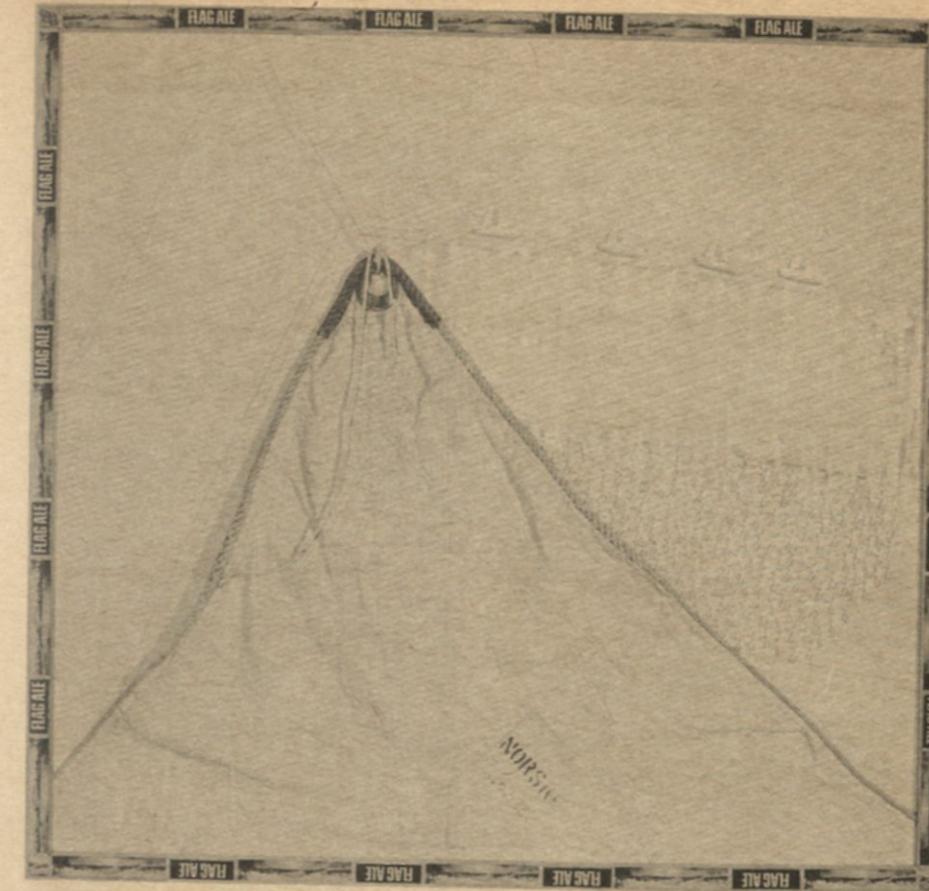
Arizona Nightmare
Paper, lithoplate and rubber stamps
 79×59.5 cm.
Lent by Hogarth Galleries, Sydney



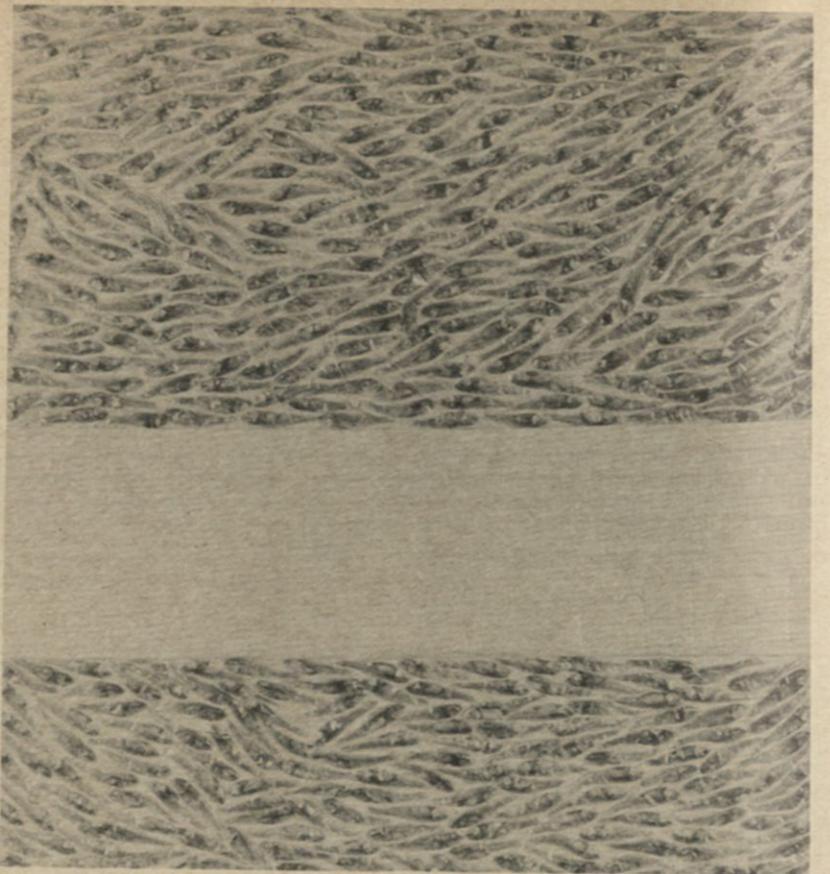
Bumper to Bumper
Paper, lithoplate and rubber stamps
 79×59.5 cm.
Lent by Hogarth Galleries, Sydney



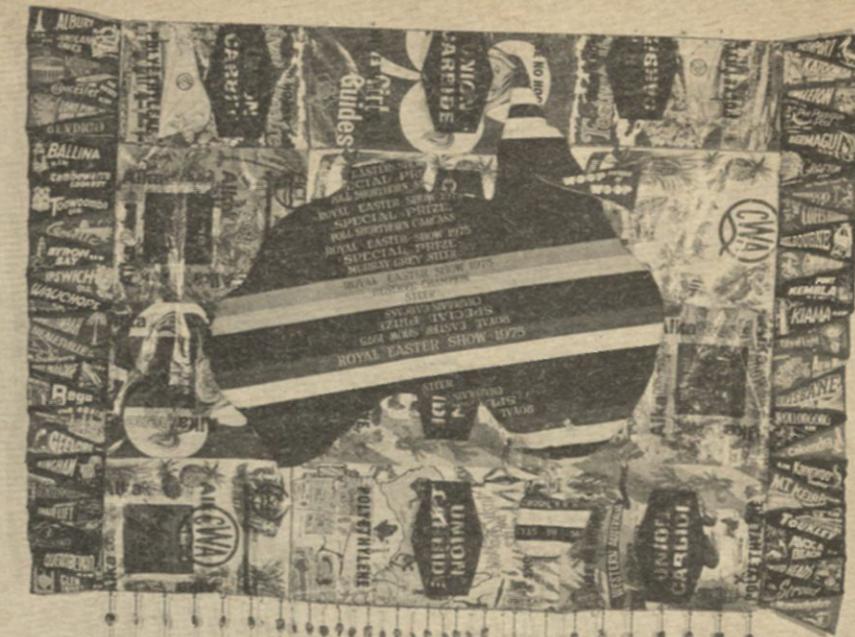
Mr. and Mrs. Kooka
Diptych, woven canvas, stove faces,
thai cedar and bamboo
167 x 76 cm. each
Lent by Hogarth Galleries, Sydney



Sailing Fans and Beer Cans
Recycled canvas sail, canvas and plastic objects
131 x 139 cm.
Lent by Mr. Wouter Dusseldorf



Fish Tank
Mixed Media
82.5 x 87.5 cm.
Lent by Hogarth Galleries, Sydney



Souvenir of Woop Woop
Mixed Media
172 x 218 cm.
Lent by The Hon. Justice Elizabeth Evatt

Sam Schoenbaum

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

- 1947 Born in Austria
1951 Emigrated to Australia
1973 Began work on 'One Years Work,' a structured journal
1974 'One Years Work' exhibited at Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne
1975 'One Years Work' exhibited at One Central St. Sydney; 'One Years Work' exhibited at The Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide
Began working with video
1976 Made the following tapes: 'Still Life': breakfast piece, 'Peeling an Orange', 'Francois', 'Across The Road'. 'Still Life' and 'Peeling an Orange' purchased for the Philip Morris Collection
Public screening of these 2 tapes at De Appel, Amsterdam, Holland
1977 'Engagement/Disengagement' a video performance at De Appel. Performance at Studio Anne Walsemann, The Hague, Holland. 'Mouthpiece' a videotape made at Galleria del Cavallino, Venice, Italy.
'Minutes Of The Meeting' a video performance with Nan Hoover at Agora Studio, maastricht, Holland.
Videotape of this performance shown at The Film Co-Op, London
1978 'Minutes Of The Meeting' performed at Anna Canepa Video Distribution, New York; 'Light News' a videocassette made with Nan Hoover at Anna Canepa Video Distribution New York; Performance of text from 'Light News' in Los Angeles; Reading from text of 'Minutes Of The Meeting' on Radio Co-Op, Vancouver, Canada; Reading from text of 'Minutes Of The Meeting' on Radio Close Los Angeles; 'Tears Flow Freely From The Centre' a performance with Nan Hoover at Western Front, Vancouver, Canada; 'Light News' shown at The Funnel, Toronto, Canada; 'Minutes Of The Meeting' performed with Nan Hoover at Vehicule, Montreal, Canada.

Sam Schoenbaum

THE ARTIST'S STATEMENT

'on the relationship between the text and its subtext'
in the beginning will be the voice of the interior
abstractions shape sounds
muscle movements tell stories and histories
reverberating theories of malpractice of stars in stripes
collisions of corporate particles designing
an inner
of time wounds and time heals
still malpractice with stars in stripes forever
meanwhile the inner voice shapes the sounds of ones hopes
all being will turn
being here changes
the voice within the voice
without his help i couldnt do it
with his help i couldnt do it either
i want to hold him but i dont want him to stay
each has his own home
elsewhere we can live together
between the text and its subtext
between the voices and the voice
each carrying text
and subtext
but not talking aloud about it
sam schoenbaum
new york city /may 31st 1978



Performance, 1978
Courtesy Anna Canepa
Video Distribution Inc. New York

Mouthpiece — Video
Venice, January 1977
Approximately 12 mins. B&W

Not illustrated
'On the relationship
between the text and its subtext.'



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1936 Born Berlin, Germany
 1956-58 Migrated to Canada
 1959 Arrived in Australia
 1962 Started painting Audodidact
 1962-65 Studied part-time, National Art School, Sydney

TRAVEL

1973-74 Guest of the Artist in Residence Programme sponsored by DAAD, Berlin

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1966 Central Street Gallery, Sydney
 1967 Central Street Gallery, Sydney
 1968 Central Street Gallery, Sydney
 1969 Central Street Gallery, Sydney
 1970 Central Street Gallery, Sydney
 1971 Coventry, 38 Hargrave Street, Paddington
 1972 South Yarra Gallery, Melbourne
 Inhibodress Gallery, Sydney
 Sao Paulo, Brazil
 38 Hargrave Street, Paddington
 Arts Council of Australia, Canberra
 38 Hargrave Street, Paddington
 1973-74 Haus am Lutzenplatz, Berlin
 Lubeck & Ingelstadt - Erlangen, Germany
 Coventry Gallery, Sydney
 1975 Barrington Gallery, New Zealand
 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
 1976 Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
 Coventry Gallery, Sydney
 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
 IMA, Brisbane
 1977 Coventry Gallery, Sydney
 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
 Coventry Gallery, Sydney
 1978

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

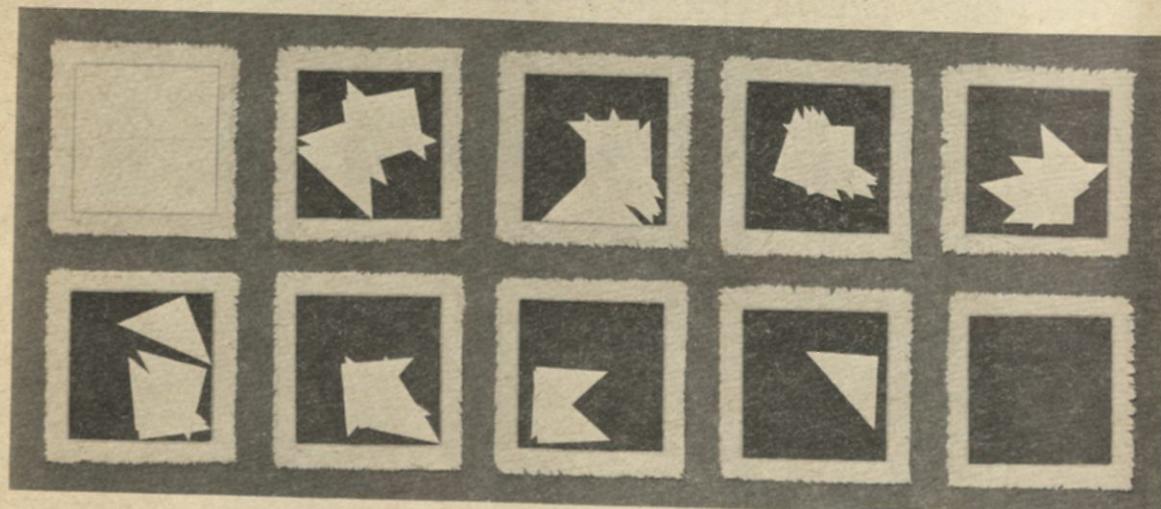
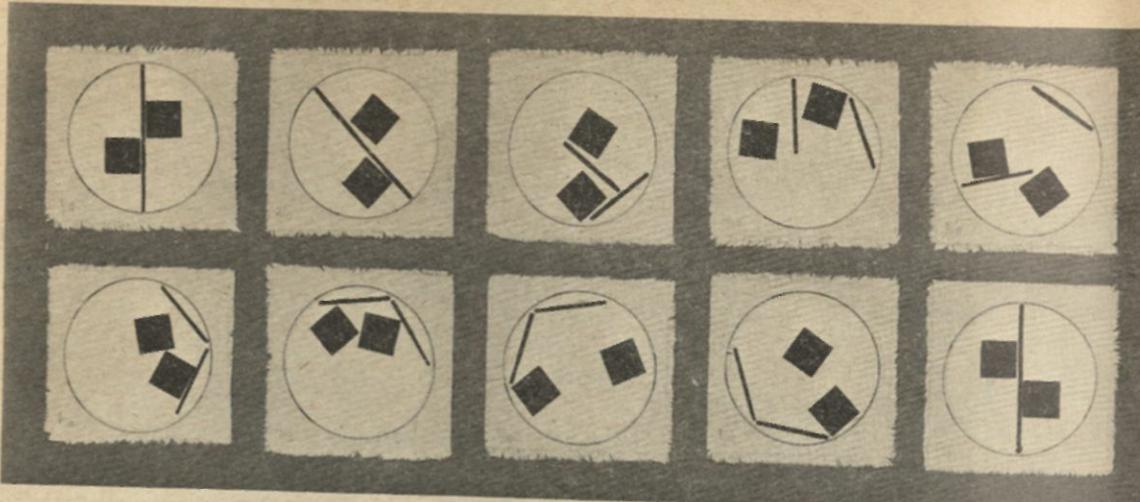
1966 Central Street Gallery, Sydney
 1967 Black & White Exhibition, Central Street Gallery, Sydney
 1968 "21st Exhibition", Central Street Gallery, Sydney; "The Field", National Gallery of Victoria & Art Gallery of N.S.W.
 1969 5th International Young Artists Exhibition, Tokyo, Japan
 1970 Central Street Gallery, Contemporary Art Society; Prize Exhibition, Blaxland Gallery, Sydney (Awarded prize); Unstretched canvas directly on wall, Central Street Gallery, Sydney; International Miniaturen 70; Gallerie 66, Frankfurt, Hofheim & Munich, Germany.
 1971 John Kaldor Art Project 2, Exhibition arranged by Harold Szeeman at Bonython Galleries Sydney and National Gallery of Victoria; XI Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil
 1972 "20 years of Australian Paintings and Tapestries", N.S.W. House, London.
 1973 1st Sydney Biennale, Opera House, Sydney; "Australian Painting Now", Art Gallery of N.S.W., Sydney; GFBK Berlin
 1974 "30 International Artists in Berlin", Bonn, Germany; 4 F.B.K. Berlin
 1975 Coventry Gallery, Sydney
 1976 6 F.B.K. Berlin; Sculpture Centre, Sydney; Country Collection, Armidale
 1977 WAIT, Perth
 1978 "The Sixties into the Seventies" Exhibition Gallery, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria.

COLLECTIONS

Art Gallery of New South Wales
 Western Australian Art Gallery
 Newcastle City Art Gallery
 Education Department, Victoria
 DAAD, Berlin
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Shopje WAIT, Perth
 National Gallery of Victoria
 Australian National Gallery, Canberra
 University of New England, Armidale
 Armidale City Council
 Queensland Art Gallery
 National Bank Collection

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1969 Present Day Art in Australia, Mervyn Horton and Daniel Thomas-Ure Smith
 1970 Colour Form Painting 1965-70, Terry Smith, Other Voices Vol. 1/1
 1971 Australian Painting 1788-1970, Bernard Smith O.U.P.
 1975 Australian Painters of the 70's, Mervyn Horton, Daniel Thomas-Ure Smith
 1976 Modern Australian Painting 1970-75, Kym Bonython, Elwyn Lynn, Rigby



10 Water Tank Positions
(Black and White)

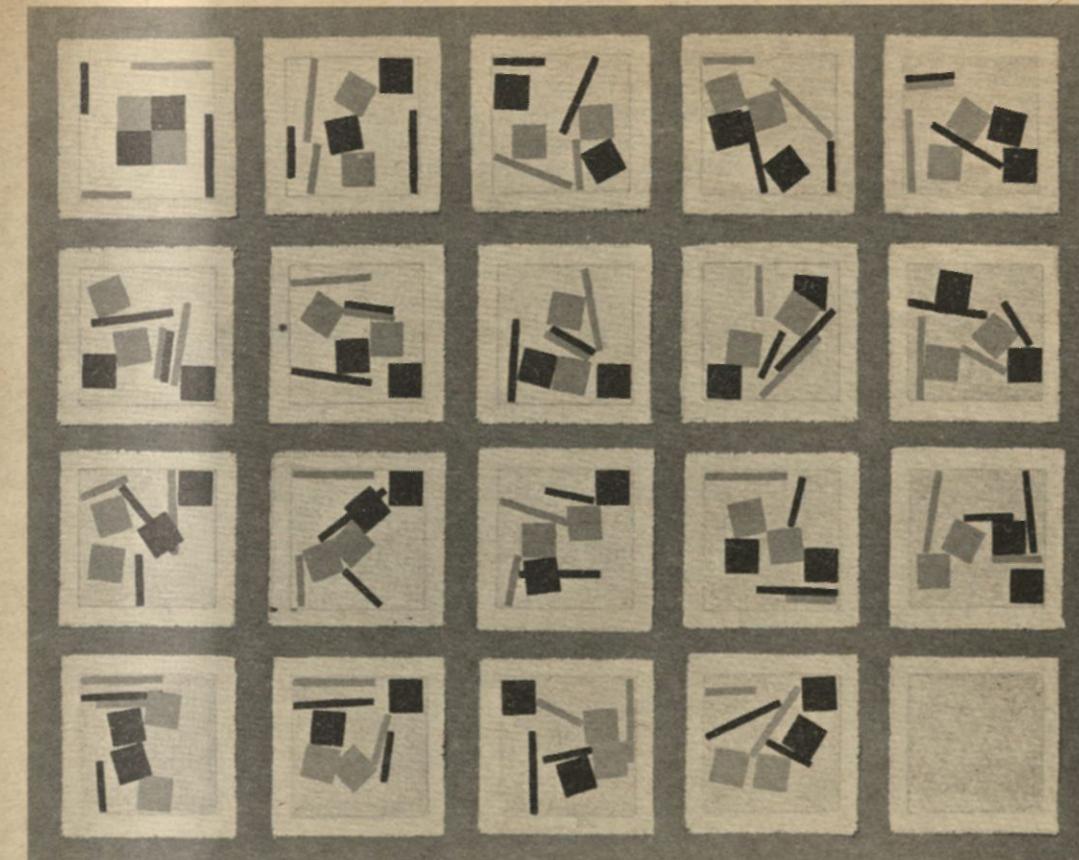
Acrylic on canvas in plastic folders,
paper back binding.

110 diameter image size
16 x 21.5 cm. in plastic folder
Collection, the artist

10 Dry Box Positions 1977
(White and Blue — 8 triangles)

Acrylic on canvas in plastic folders,
paper back binding.

110 x 110 mm. image size
16 x 21.5 cm. in plastic folder
Collection, the artist



1 / 20 "Sketchbook Series" 1977
(20 Water Tank positions)

Acrylic on canvas in plastic folders,
hard back binding.

110 x 110 mm. image size
16 x 21 cm. in plastic folder
Collection, the artist

Not illustrated

Record
Audio Plastik No. 4
Sydney 1974-77

(Jew's Harp and traffic)
edition of 200 signed L.P.'s

Collection, Chandler Coventry Gallery

Untitled
Acrylic on canvas screen and
80 slides

Collection, Philip Morris (Aust.) Ltd.

Richard Dunn

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1944 Born Sydney
Studied at the University of New South Wales, 1962-64, and the Royal College of Art, 1966-69. M.Art (RCA) 1969. Lectures at the Sydney College of the Arts.

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1972, 75, 77 *Gallery A, Sydney*
1976 *Warehouse Gallery, Melbourne*

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1963-65 *Contemporary Art Society Exhibitions, Sydney*
1965 '25 Young Painters'; *Argus Gallery, Melbourne*
1966 *NSW Travelling Art Scholarship, Art Gallery of NSW*
1967-68 *Three Schools, Royal Academy Galleries, London*
1969 *RCA, RA Exhibition, Royal Academy Galleries; Degree Show, Royal College of Art; "London 69", Arnhem Gallery, Croydon, England*
1971 *Clytie Jessup Gallery, London*
1975 *Warehouse Gallery, Melbourne*
1976 *Coventry Collection, University of New England, Armidale*
1977 *Georges Invitation Art Prize, Georges Gallery, Melbourne*
1978 "The Sixties Into The Seventies" *Exhibition Gallery, Monash University.*

COLLECTIONS

Royal College of Art, London
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Australian National Gallery, Canberra
Ballarat City Art Gallery
Armidale City Council Collection
Philip Morris Collection
National Bank of Australasia
Commonwealth Lending Collection, Canberra

AWARDS

1966 *New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship*
1967 *Dyason Request Awards*
1975 *Visual Arts Board Grant, Australia Council*
1976 *Special Projects Grant, Australia Council*
1977 *Georges Invitation Art Prize Purchase*

Richard Dunn

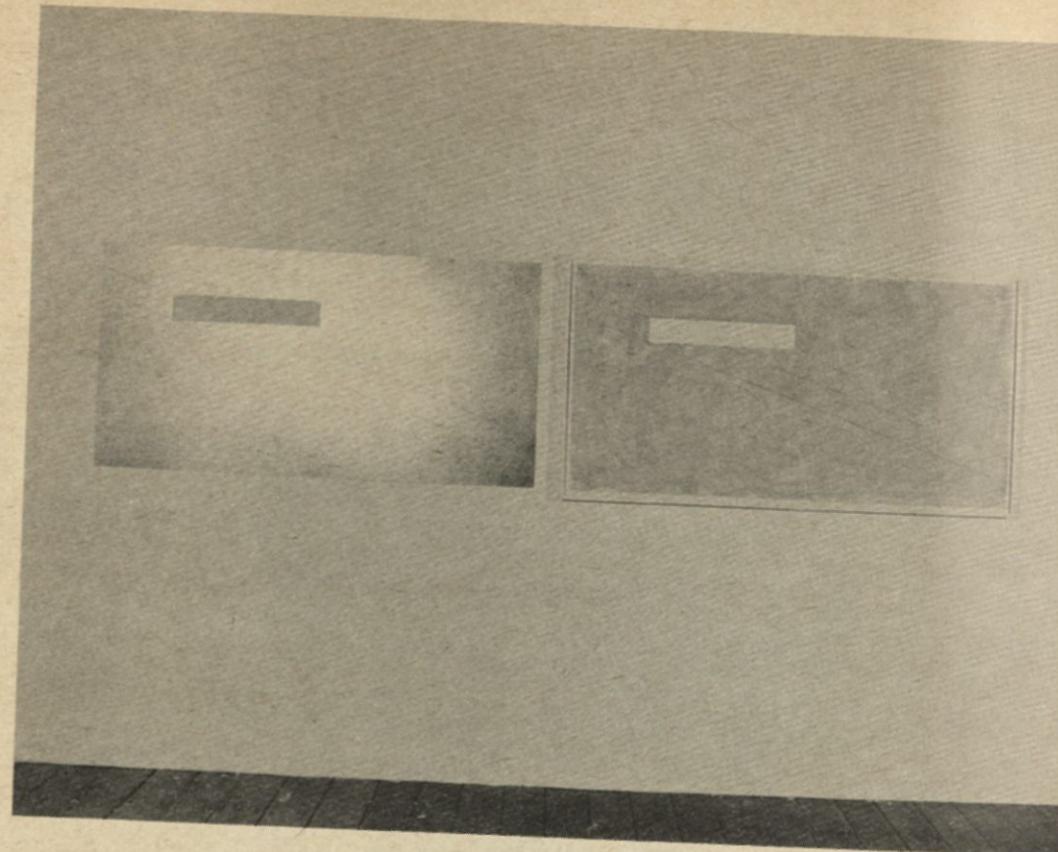
THE ARTIST'S STATEMENT

There are many levels to working with art. To define one would lead to an exclusion to others. Response is defined by attitudes and concepts generating work. Attitudes toward work are determined by personal biases and cultural imperatives. Alternative readings are determined by personal biases, expectation and cultural conventions. My and your conception of a work which sits on the wall. But all the clues remain within the work. As in a detective story all conjectures are founded on evidence. What follows from reading the evidence leads to a heuristic situation where further information may be gathered by analogy.

The following works have a specific context yet they sit on art's ideal wall. Flat and white. Obscure when related to the works which accompany them, and separated from their conceptual context. They move back and forth. Shifting attention amongst themselves. They invite attention to their visual language. Two squares — placing a line/rationalizing six squares placement. A cumbersome situation. They hint at their conceptual language. When it comes to meaning it seems as though there is little one can say without the use of metaphor.

Richard Dunn 1978

Richard Dunn



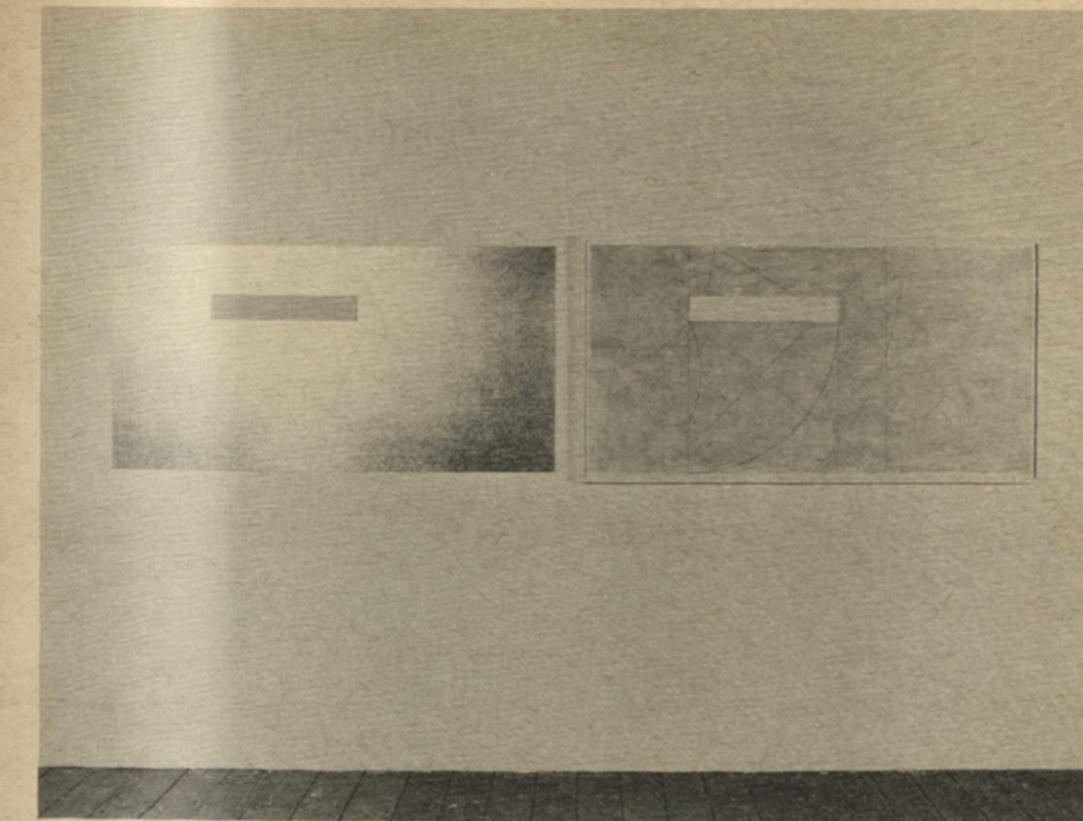
"Two Squares — placing a line /rationalizing six squares placement"

Sheet Metal 75 x 150

Drawing 78 x 153

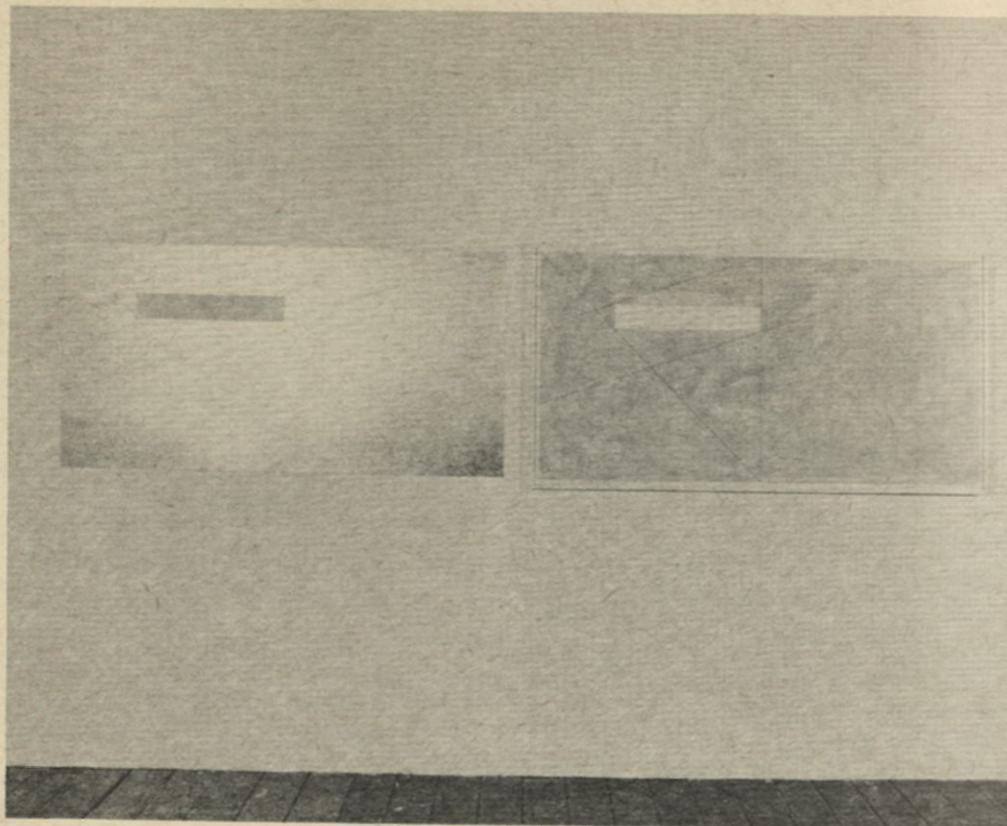
Graphite coloured pencil and pink primer on paper
signed dated 1976/78
Collection, the artist

Richard Dunn



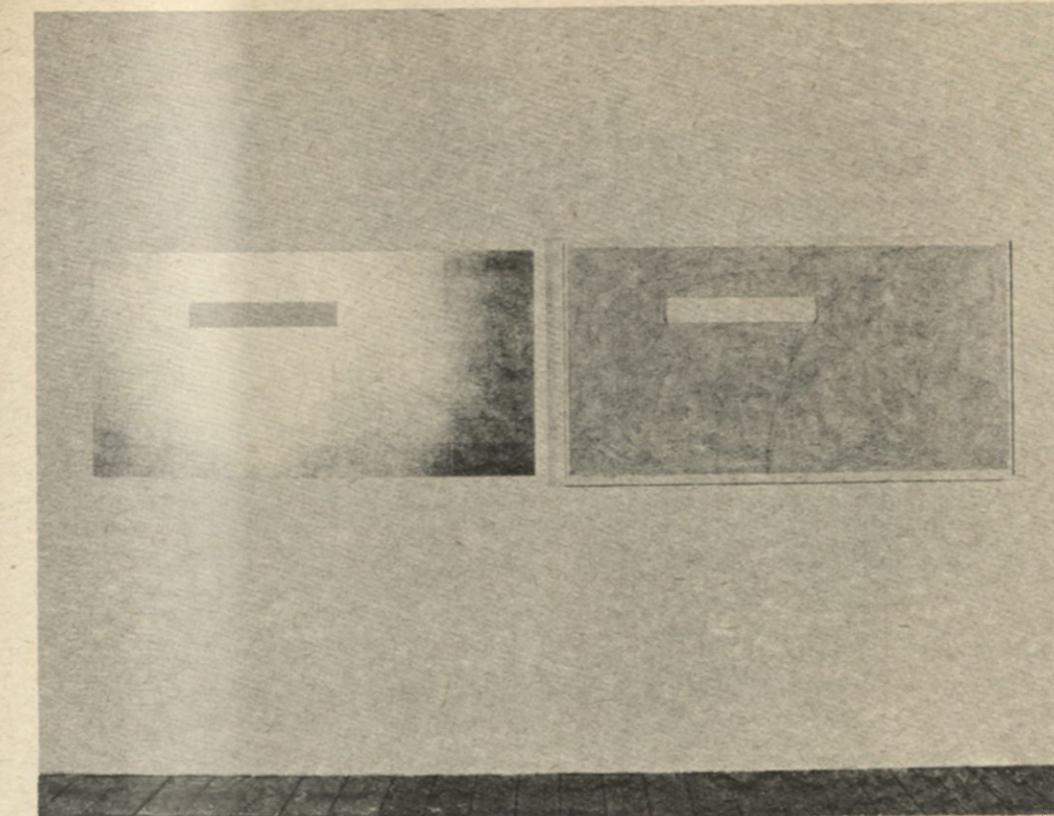
Sheet Metal 75 x 150
Drawing 78 x 153
Graphite coloured pencil and pink primer on paper
signed dated 1976/78
Collection, the artist

Richard Dunn



Sheet Metal 75 x 150
Drawing 78 x 153
Graphite coloured pencil and pink primer on paper
signed date 1976 /78
Collection, the artist

Richard Dunn



Sheet Metal 75 x 150
Drawing 78 x 153
Graphite coloured pencil and pink primer on paper
signed dated 1976 /78
Collection, the artist

Paul Partos

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1943 Born, Czechoslovakia
1949-50 To Australia via Paris. After six months in Perth settled in Melbourne
1959-62 Studied Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Dip. Fine Art - Painting.

TRAVEL

1965-66 Europe and U.K. Painted and worked in London for eight months.
1970-72 Lived in New York.

AWARDS

1969 Awarded first prize "Corio Art Prize", Geelong Art Gallery.

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1965 Expressionist paintings, Gallery A, Melbourne and Sydney
1973 "Recent Work and Early Links", Ewing Gallery, University of Melbourne
1974 Paintings and drawings, Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne
1976 Metal plates paintings and "Painting within painting" paintings, Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1964 'Young Minds', Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
1966 Participated in Crouch Prize, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery Perth Festival Prize Georges Invitation Art Prize, Melbourne
1967 'The Field', National Gallery of Victoria and Art Gallery of N.S.W.; Transfield Invitation Art Prize, Bonython Art Gallery, Sydney;
1968 "Group 1", Gallery A, Melbourne; Georges Invitation Art Prize, Melbourne.
1969 "Unspecified Lengths", Gallery A, Melbourne; photograph of "Unspecified Lengths", Gallery A, Sydney; "Four Artists", Gallery A, Melbourne
1971 "Recent Australian Art", Art Gallery of N.S.W.
1975 "Artists' Artists", National Gallery of Victoria
1976 "Minimal", National Gallery of Victoria

COLLECTIONS

The Australian National Gallery, Canberra
The National Gallery of Victoria
Art Gallery of N.S.W.
The South Australian Art Gallery
Philip Morris
Monash University Art Collection

HERE

A Note on the Paintings of Paul Partos

Most painters hang their works; Paul Partos positions his. And most painters would like you to see nothing but the painting; when you look at a Partos, you are often made conscious of seeing it in a particular place. Though this place is literally a different one for each painting, in a crucial sense it is also the one place over and over again. This place is called here.

By way of demonstration, let us take one painting and try to characterize its presence with some precision. Almost any work would do, but for our purposes I have selected a small one from 1976, **Untitled — cream**. As it is barely twenty inches square it invites close inspection.

What you see is a surface fairly evenly covered with horizontal strokes made with a palette knife, strokes that vary in length from about one to three inches. When you look more closely you notice that in some places the strokes don't quite join: in these gaps you see exactly the same cream, this time applied more expressively with the brush. It seems as if the surface was all like this once, but then the artist re-worked it, cancelling out the marks of the brush in favour of the buttery grooves of the knife.

Yet the surface, even in its final state, is not quite the first thing which attracts your attention: cutting across it there is a black elastic thread anchored to the wall by two nails. It seems to hold the weight of the painting against the wall. Furthermore, all four corners of the work and the mid-points on its two vertical sides carry numbers on the surface: 1 and 2 are in the top corners, 3 and 4 in the lower ones, and 5 and 6 at the sides. If you read them off in their proper order your eye will track an imaginary Z on reaching 4, and then will track a reversed and squatter Z on moving to 6.

Paul Partos

On the basis of this hopefully adequate description, let us make a few observations about **Untitled — cream**. Perhaps the first thing we must note is that the wall on which the painting rests is very much a part of the work; the painting is, in effect, a part of the place wherein it is seen. Ten years ago Partos made a similar connection by having holes in the middle of his canvases — his paintings then were nothing but a frame. Now the middles are covered with paint, but the edges of the work are echoed beyond the painting's frame — or, as in some recent works, re-asserted within the painting.

At the same time as the thread reminds us of the place in which we view the painting, it also governs our response to the surface. Any painted surface is also a fictional space, one the eye is all too ready to see in atmospheric terms. This tendency is arrested by the imposition of the thread, which holds the illusory space of the painting in suspension. As the artist himself has noted, the paintings are "naked and illusionistic" without the thread. Though illusion is invoked by Partos's handling of paint it is not endorsed by the finished work.

Yet what kind of function do the numerals here perform — or even the letters that other paintings carry? Many viewers have expressed the opinion that these signs are an even more gratuitous addition than the black string and that both devices smack of an artist who lacks the inventiveness to make his paintings really interesting. Rather than struggle with a significant image, he captures the viewer's attentions with novelties and gimmicks. After all, what do they really add up to? One, two, three, four, anyone can count! When you reach the highest number you can perhaps be excused for thinking that there is nothing more to look at.

But one of the things which the numerals clearly do, just by their positioning, is make the eye more fully

Paul Partos

acquainted with the perimeters of the painting, and in this emphasis on area or physical expanse the device further delays any illusionistic reading of the surface. The paint remains paint, rather than taking on a second life as air and space. Somewhat paradoxically, the numerals also hinder us from viewing the work as primarily a physical object, if only because they suggest the operation of some purpose.

And what could this purpose be? I suspect that the more general associations of numerals and letters are a clue here. You may recall that the impressionists and their apologists liked to declare that there were no lines in nature; more clearly still, there are no numerals in nature either. One of the things which Partos could be emphasizing is that a painting is not a natural thing and thus should not be confused with the objects of nature; what reality it possesses is intrinsic to it, rather than being a property of the objects it may image or represent.

A pedantic point, perhaps, but after you grasp it the works begin to capitalize on the more positive associations of such devices. When you use numbers or their surrogates (a,b,c,d, or whatever) you are mentally identifying things and singling them out: rather than being a physical object or an abstract idea, they are then figures in a moment of consciousness, a moment in which they are present, immediate and **here**. These paintings are about such moments of apprehension; they 'picture' that point at which an object of consciousness disentangles itself from a background and moves into the forefront of consciousness, that here to which all your attentions are directed.

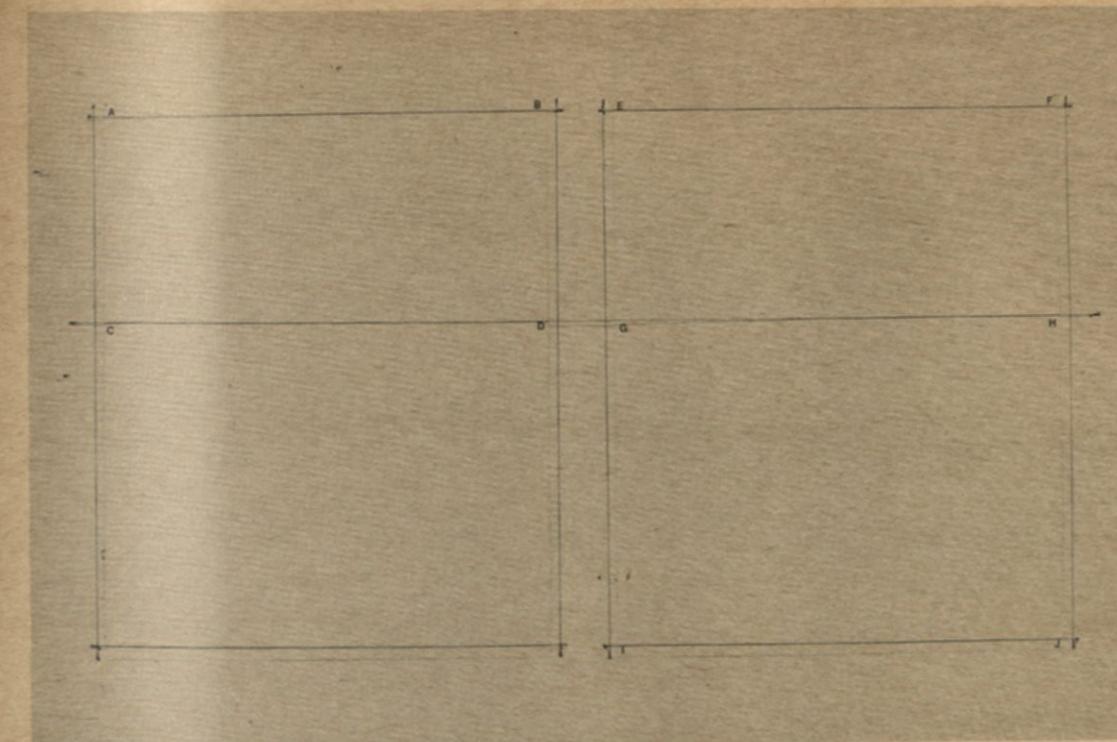
This moment is, of course, not wholly or simply rational in its operations; it is not for nothing that the surfaces of these paintings are often as tangibly thick as an elephant's hide. You can drum your fingers on them if you want to. Partos's early paintings (one critic

talked of their "cataclysmic distortions") recalled the expressionist Picasso of the Thirties; these more recent works clearly bear the marks of a sensual delight in the manipulation of paint and a guarded suspicion of the same enterprise. Like the devices they contain, the works themselves speak of suspension, cancellation and delay. He is not so much an artist who is Janus-faced as one sitting on his own back, ready to tug hard at the reins when his instincts would like to have their heads.

It is as if he believes that full consciousness is imperilled by any excess; in the ecstasy of forgetfulness the latter leads to, one is no longer conscious of just where one stands. Here, there and everywhere are one and the same, and the world is co-extensive with the ego. And so he likes to keep the limits and boundaries in mind, for within them observation becomes both possible and pleasurable, and one can live in the contingent here of the present — this brief, glittering, undamaged moment when you are fully aware of just where you stand and what you see, this, here, now.

Gary Catalano.

Paul Partos



Untitled 1974-1975
Oil on two aluminium panels,
thread & letters
141 x 114.5 cm. each
Collection, the artist