

## Bananarama Republic<sup>1</sup>

### Map

Recall two enmeshed postmodern tendencies, both claiming *zeitgeist* status as landmark exhibitions, and seen at the time to be diametrically opposed: 'Popism' (NGV 1981) and Biennale of Sydney (AGNSW 1984).<sup>2</sup> The first was hot and hitched to neo-expressionist painting: wild and bitter, hegemonic whilst stressing a regional *genius loci*; the second was Pop-inflected: cool with stylistic quotation, irony and ambivalent speculations. Some felt that neo-expressionism was an international boys' club of juggernaut blockbusters (eg the Italian Transavantgardia; Berlin's wild ones etc). Yet both tendencies claimed the image as art's 'go-to' investigative platform - a retreat from feral 1970s postmodern forays: 'twigs and string' open-form sculpture and conceptual directives; the grungier depths of punk; and the nappy and tampon work of cutting-edge feminism. All mostly uncollectable, whereas the celebrated 'return to the studio' was institutionally sanctioned with well-funded exhibitions, brisk sales and critical acclaim.

This sketchy map is probably 'something you look through' as Ian Burn and Narelle Jubelin remind us about landscape painting. Beyond the style-markers and gallery listings, what kinds of street-smart cultural politics were then available? Unlike the Brixton rioters or the flying picketers clashing with police across Yorkshire's coalfields, Australian politics in the 1980s was slipping 'gently into that good night' of Labour's Hawke-Keating Accord, which many now feel introduced our current neo-liberal economic regime, but with had a benign, kinder face.<sup>3</sup> But not even that. In retrospect, this was not a time of kindness but of distress, anger and deep sadness as an entire generation sickened and died, whilst governments captured by the evangelical right-wing (notably in the US under Reagan) spouted homophobic responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. LGBTQI communities were decimated and radicalised, whilst other progressive social movements fragmented and dissipated to the academies (the university, museum and gallery). Those glory days of postmodern theoretical merch saw a flourishing moment for little magazines laden with translations, unreadable experiments in ficto-criticism and cheaply-reproduced, B&W folios.<sup>4</sup> On the more established art circuit, a growing file of (largely white male) curators shuttled between the arts organisations, major galleries and definitive survey shows.<sup>5</sup> The street became a place for parties, not marches.

The networking and tastemaking power of commercial galleries also held sway. In Melbourne, Tolarno and United Artists (later Anna Schwartz) dominated, while in Sydney Yuill Crowley, RoslynOxley9 and Mori Gallery pegged the city's commercial postmodern triangle, and Ace Burke promoted contemporary Indigenous work at Hogarth. Networks of smaller artist-run galleries also relayed the postmodern program, courtesy of a brief flurry of Oz Co project funding and a booming art market. Melbourne's Gertrude St and Store 5, and Sydney's First Draft, Art Unit, Union St and Artspace paralleled the New York's artist-run model of White Columns/Artists Project Space, with Street Level at Blacktown as a University of Western Sydney outpost. The Artworkers Union, an exemplar and swansong of

earlier industrial artist organisations, campaigned hard (and relatively successfully) for artist fees and contracts, affirmative action for women artists and for workplace health and safety.

These spaces worked as creative clusters for emerging artists. The private sector/public sector alliance quietly promoted a looser, associationist<sup>6</sup> model of arts entrepreneurship that replaced older, collective ways of art making and organising (the WAM feminist collectives, the Artworkers Union, the Sydney filmmakers' co-op). The contemporary spaces, studios and editorial groups of the 1980s that enjoyed project funding and commercial sector support were flexible and generative, but also financially vulnerable and often short-lived. As the decade progressed, the Australia Council tilted its 'access and excellence' mandate to support high-end, metropolitan 'flagship' contemporary art spaces and 'one from each state' journals, under the guise of growing curatorial and critical professionalism. More radical and artist-controlled developments emerged in this period from within the community-based First Nations' art centres, from ANKAA in Darwin to Sydney's Boomalli, where a new generation of Indigenous curators, many of whom were also artists, introduced audiences to new worlds of contemporary urban practice alongside the better-known Western Desert, Kimberley and Arnhem Land epicenters of the Aboriginal art revolution (as documented at Papunya by conceptual painter Tim Johnson and Vivien Johnson's ground breaking *Dictionary of Western Desert Artists*).

In 1987, markets crashed, inflation spiralled, and chastened collectors retreated to blue chip purchases, whilst artists mounted group shows with titles like *Fortune* to take stock of those earlier, inflationary times.<sup>7</sup> Some held that earlier postmodernist appropriations had reflected neo-liberalism's growing laissez faire mentality, "built on taking – grabbing what you can from wherever it seems possible",<sup>8</sup> an art that was attractive, playfully ironic and that accidentally affirmed rather than jammed our consumer culture. In any case, the market 'correction' hit smaller gallery networks hard, and hastened the dominance of art fairs, auction houses and the incoming Net, where online selling further blurred demarcations between first and secondary markets.

### **Program**

Take-away art history tells us that by the 1960s, modernism's creed of progress and liberation no longer stacked up. The art object itself was not a hermetic, static and aesthetically self-sufficient thing. Yet for a brief, transitional moment in the 1980s, artists rallied around the canvas flag to celebrate or mourn the failure of modernism's innovatory experiments and promised liberation from want and to speculate on future forms of cultural politics, by paradoxically looking back to earlier art historical moments. For many, painting itself (and for others, studio sculpture) was a fitting platform from which to ironically re-route our (Western) high art and low-brow legacies. Artists schooled in minimalism and conceptualism explored a variety of social, perceptual, epistemological frames to answer the questions: what is art, and what is it good for? Art was again marked by a sense of the catastrophic. All those qualities beloved of modernism - originality, authenticity, artistic creativity, formally novelty and innovation – came under question, and particularly when it came to traditional mediums

such as easel painting. With avant-garde heroism convincingly challenged by feminist, regionalist and decolonial perspectives, how could gallery-based artists make purposive cultural interventions when faced with an absolute relativity of means (as artist Peter Tyndall would have it, at base it's just someone looking at something)? Some held that our mediated world seemed to be one of the few spaces left for commentary, in the face of the retreat of the real and the eclipse of the public sphere. In this narrow critical space, to be an image-scavenger was an authentic if not original space for cultural interrogation.<sup>9</sup> Artists immersed in feminism and punk DIY adopted the club-land DJ practice of mixing pre-existing tracks to chase down and re-route hegemonic systems of meaning. The main thing was to keep moving, to jam 'the culture of the image' with its phantasmagoric exchanges of signage. Image-games questioned real from copy along an ever-receding horizon of meaning, for as the old adage held, every picture, even those auratic masterworks from the past, was "a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture."<sup>10</sup> Under the combined direction of the artist, critic and curator, the tireless spectator was tasked with reading and producing pretty well everything.

This so-called 'cultural turn' spun around painterly style-tags: appropriation art, popism, neo-expressionism, neo-geo, transavantgarde, neo-conceptualism and conceptual painting, amongst others. All variously attested to the fact that the past is not a pure space of recollection and memory. Image scavenging enabled a form of historical erasure: some artists and audiences simply reproduced the structural characteristics of an already saturated cultural form, to erase its previous meanings as a kind of 'cultural forgetting', and to question the truth of perception and the very idea of authentic experience that had been central to the modern project.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde styles made a big comeback. Possibly the liveliest use of collage pulled from dada and early cinematic montage (and later Burroughs-styled 'cut-ups') graced punk record covers and band posters, small magazines and cheap n' hasty Super-8 films from the period. Many artists-musicians-filmmakers worked on all fronts. With minimalist relish in tedium, popular music was run into the ground, and once more, the spectator was tasked with claiming a radical stance against the pop-music-commodity world in which the form is embedded. As John Nixon's *pneumatic drill* newsletter drilled, "the silent voice of Anti-music, echoing in the minds of the readers". The poor audience had even more to read.

Did we stick to the program?<sup>11</sup> Most artists actually romped through art history and popular culture as secret fans rather than refuseniks. We did not turn our backs so much as retrieve art's value from the scrap-heap, rediscovering painterly qualities anew, or modelling the vulnerable, human figure with a sympathetic and often humorous "protective empathy" as Julie Ewington has described Linda Marrinon's later sculptural work.<sup>12</sup> Norrie, Brennan, Marrinon, Shark Le Witt and others revisited past art "to rediscover its necessity rather than declare its redundancy", as Chris McAuliffe has also observed.<sup>13</sup> Abstract painters paid homage to the utopian goals of early twentieth century abstraction whilst interrogating its more crazy premises. Others tracked traditional studio practices with sympathy and wit to

examine their own (fraught) relation to canonical tradition. We played with the gendered aesthetic values aligned with historical moral high ground styles and mediums such as neo-classicism (Ann Ferran) or investigated autobiographical events through the painterly language of historical styles, and vice versa (Susan Norrie). Artists painted relations of power and knowledge between art and broader social, economic and political relations. They gate-crashed the body politic of art history and popular culture through an erotic body that taunted with “picture-puzzles of masculinity and femininity”<sup>14</sup> (Juan Davila), whilst First Nations scavengers tilted Western culture to see what barbarities lay underneath (Judy Watson, Fiona Foley). This strategy of *détournement* allowed First Nations artists and curators to wear out colonial photography and film archives, facilitate important family and community reconnections, observe the displacement of Indigenous peoples from the national story and offer divergent narratives and images of female beauty. Indeed, decolonial, queer and feminist artists from places dominated by Western art variously faked their own art historical subjectification to pick at these structural displacements<sup>15</sup> like one does to an itchy, old scab. By swathing the feminine body in rhetorics of ethnography, fine art, advertising or cinematic beauty, its formal and material opacities - paint, powder, ornament – expressed no underlying authenticity or dark matter, for as feminist artists had earlier demonstrated, opacity is generated within the mechanism of representation itself. Therein lay an ambitious provocation: that such radical aesthetic gestures had ‘nothing to hide’ but their own critical pleasures: there was no ghost in the machine.<sup>16</sup>

### Legacy

What has been the legacy of the 1980s ‘cultural turn’? At first glance, not much. Art has returned to grassroots politics within a changing media environment, where the compelling image of School Strike for Climate, BLM tee-shirts and brown and pink pussy hats thronging the streets suggests a more savvy understanding of representational politics: the ‘visual grab and act’ of hashtag activism. Yet arguably this confidence builds on earlier, postmodern efforts to shift depictions of difference, truth-telling and reconciliation as processes of materialization and allusion: *aesthetics* as an embodied and affective *ethics*. The situated art of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter developed within and subsequently moved away from the generalised postmodern analyses of dominant systems of visual representation (western art history, pop music and mass media). Progressive art now sets its sights beyond representational power-politics *per se*, towards a targeted ‘politics of acts’ and ethics rather than identities. In the process, artists happily abandon western tropes of whiteness, femininity and bourgeois decorum. We can now ask whether a decade of picaresque image-scavenging across the ruined, floating signifiers of art history was indeed a confused form of neo-liberal ‘choice’, or a prelude to the nonchalant engagement with western popular media and high art that has now become commonplace?

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<sup>2</sup> Imants Tillers, ‘Fear of Texture’, *Art & Text* Winter 1983, pp. 8-18

<sup>3</sup> Van Badham, 'Australian Labor led centre-left parties into neoliberalism. Can they lead it out?' *The Guardian* 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/06/australian-labor-led-centre-left-parties-into-neoliberalism-can-they-lead-it-out>

<sup>4</sup> Older art journals such as *LIP* and *Art Network* were defunded by mid-decade and were overtaken by overtly postmodern platforms like *Art & Text*, *Tension*, *On the Beach*, *Frogger*, amongst other more broadly- scoped cultural journals. *Photofile* was another important media-specific vehicle for post-modern discussion.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Bill Wright, Leon Parossien, Nick Waterlow, Gary Sangster. This is not to denigrate the exhibitions they curated, nor to pass over those elegant and intelligent shows curated by Judy Annear (George Paton & Ewing Galleries in Melbourne, and Artspace in Sydney later in the decade) or Bernice Murphy's curatorial direction of *Perspecta* – our first local, biannual, 'documenta'-style survey of Australian contemporary art at the AGNSW. Such exhibitions were always contentious (eg artists protesting the 1979 and 1984 Biennale of Sydney, and in 1983 bringing *Perspecta* to task for its poor representation of women's work (generally around 25%) at a time when feminist theory was influential.

<sup>6</sup> For a contemporary meditation of this late 19<sup>th</sup> century political theory see Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy. New forms of economic and social governance*, University of Massachusetts Press (January 1994)

<sup>7</sup> *Fortune* opened at the George Parton gallery, Melbourne, November 1987. Artists were Janet Burchill, Jeff Gibson, Geoff Kleem, Jacky Redgate, Geoff Weary, Anne Zahalka. Later toured Ivan Dougherty Sydney, IMA Brisbane and the EAF in Adelaide.

<sup>8</sup> Pam Hansford, 'Fortune', *Art & Text*, No 30, Sept-Nov 1988, p. 89

<sup>9</sup> These practices were variously and humourously described in *Art & Text* by Adrian Martin, Edward Colless and Dave Kelly.

<sup>10</sup> This was an oft-quoted claim from Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image — Music — Text*, selected and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana; Glasgow: Collins, 1977) p. 146

<sup>11</sup> I use the term loosely here, to denote the critical program articulated by Paul Taylor in his early *Art & Text* editorship. See Paul Taylor, 'Editorial: On Criticism' and Australian "New Wave" and the 'Second Degree', in *Art & Text* No 1, Autumn 1981, 5-11; 23-32

<sup>12</sup> Julie Ewington, 'Intimacy and distance', in *Linda Marrinon: Figure Sculpture 2005–2015*, exhibition catalogue, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2015, p 22.

<sup>13</sup> Chris McAuliffe, *Linda Marrinon: Let Her Try*, Craftsman House, Melbourne, 2007, p 12.

<sup>14</sup> See George Alexander, 'The World, the Flesh and Davila', *Art & Text* No 30, Sept-Nov 1988, p.84

<sup>15</sup> See Judith Butler, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, NY: Routledge, 1990, p,145.

<sup>16</sup> See in this context Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015