

THE SCOPE OF ANZART OBSERVATIONS Daniel Thomas

A historic event. The first significant presentation of avant-garde art in Tasmania. I don't count the long-standing annual Tasmanian Art Purchase exhibition of middle-of-the-road contemporary paintings and sculptures, organised by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart. I don't count occasional near-private avant-garde events organised by art students, such as the mid-1970's "pun-events" with Bruce Lamrock in Launceston.

The sense of occasion was emphasised by the official opening of this "second Australia-New Zealand artists' encounter" by Sir James Plimsoll, governor of Tasmania. I doubt that any other Australian vice-regal person has lent himself to such an occasion. Of course there was a large measure of government-support from New Zealand and Australia, in the form of money and in the form of the temporary presence in Hobart of many of each country's cultural officials. That was a diplomatic point which a former ambassador such as Plimsoll would appreciate. But it was nevertheless inspired of the organisers to invite him to perform the opening, and it was generous of him to accept. His opening address was entirely sensitive to the audience in front of him, and thus it compared more than favourably with the previous week's opening in Sydney of the *Australian Perspective* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. His Excellency thus made many friends in the young world of recession-art.

The local newspaper was observed (at least during Anzart's first five days, which I spent in Hobart) to have been rather unaware of this historic event in Hobart. The local establishment, apart from Mr and Mrs Claudio Alcorso and the staff of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, was conspicuously absent from the opening ceremony, but this was not surprising given the unfamiliar nature of the event and its completely unfamiliar headquarters. It was an abandoned mail-exchange building, but very conveniently situated at the side of the waterfront Parliament House, between the tourist area of Salamanca Place and the central business area. More surprising was the absence from the opening ceremony of the better-known local painters and sculptors.

Perhaps more of the local painters and sculptors and the local general public turned up as the three weeks continued, but even if

they didn't I doubt that it matters. What was obviously of great value was the educational stimulus given to the local students, and the artistic stimulus caused by the coming together, for a few days, of the many experimental artists, young and old, from Tasmania and the mainland, and from New Zealand and Europe. Anzart was conceived in 1981 as an "artists' encounter" and that, triumphantly, is what seemed to have been achieved.

For example the unscheduled performance-pieces. Andrew Drummond (New Zealand) and Stephen Turpie (Victoria) at dusk on Monday 23 May performed the most

Daniel Thomas is Senior Curator at the Australian National Gallery and author of Outlines of Australian Art: The Joseph Brown Collection (McMillan 1973).

Andrew Drummond, Jon Rose and Stephen Turpie, performance, Salamanca Place, Hobart, 1983.



beautiful piece of those I saw. Accompanied from above by Jon Rose's cello-music in a high warehouse-window, they quietly climbed through the branches of a row of severely lopped ailing waterfront-trees on Salamanca Place, tying greenery to the stumps. In the dark, in their white boiler-suits, the two men's bodies, exactly in scale with the trees' heavy branches, became floating, luminous, healing spirits, the rhythms of their deliberate climbing-and-tying work producing a remarkably soothing and comforting experience.

Or, on the same night, a small impromptu piece by a Sydney teacher (male) and pupil (female), instigated by the latter. Adrian Hall and Adriane Boag painted onto a streetfront-window of the Mail Exchange, simultaneously from inside and from outside, the inscription "Who wears the trousers Adrian(e)?"



Adriane Boag and Adrian Hall, Who wears the trousers, Adrian(e)?, performance, Old Hobart Mail Exchange, Hobart, 1983.

Undoubtedly, performance art still lives. Perhaps those mid-1970s artists, such as Drummond, who took it up when it was new, will continue to produce the best work. For example Derek Kreckler's *Radioing, Sometimes Myth* was a planned and perfect performance-piece by an established artist. So was Bonita Ely's photocopying piece in unrecognisable secretarial guise.

But there was also a newer kind of performance art, by the younger members of recession art collectives such as Hardened Arteries and Art Unit, both of Sydney. Seldom poetic, soothing or long, their pieces are short, noisy and angry. Sometimes, as with *Killing time*, they have been devised primarily for urban-guerilla performance in working class pubs and trade union hangouts.

Recession art also means ephemeral installations of cheap materials. The Mail Exchange building, and the exhibition at

the former Blundstone boot-factory which now houses the newly formed Chameleon Collective, were both notable for creative use of small closets and store-rooms for installation-pieces. Juilee Pryor's personal artists' books were set in a tableau filled with autumn leaves from the streets of Hobart. Rob McDonald's blood-and-book piece about genetic engineering occupied a shelved cupboard behind a closed door. Bo Jones and John Bennett, at Chameleon, filled a closet in the former boot-factory with a number of leatherworkers' obsolete sewing-machines whose spindles were connected by live audiotape to a tape-recorder from which shy old men spoke of their past life in the factory.

Hardened Arteries and Art Unit are unfunded by any public agency. Some of these new collectives prefer not to seek funding. Certainly these collectives, with Chameleon, have produced some of the most interesting new art. They are not concerned solely with performance art and ephemeral installations. Michael Hill's walk-in installation was in effect a walk-in painting (a walk-in Philip Guston painting) and he is clearly very concerned with traditional painting-expression. So was Belinda Holland's painted self-portrait in a broadly executed wall-painting wasteland.

Only on my last night in Hobart, at the \$3-a-head screening of the Victorian College of the Arts Gallery's travelling exhibition *Film as Art*, did the facts of life for recession-artists really hit. At interval-time it was plain that only the prosperous middle-aged art-teachers and curators were there. The young artists from the collectives might have made their way to Hobart from Sydney or Adelaide, but they couldn't afford \$3 for *Film as Art*. I realised they were certainly not going to afford Terry Smith's \$10 literary luncheon later that week either.

Object art of considerable beauty was also present in the workshop atmosphere of the Mail Exchange, but it would have gained by a traditional art-museum setting. If there had been advance knowledge of Hossein Valamanesh's lamp-lit tent-constructions (from Adelaide), or of John Hurrell's series of honey-coloured waxy lettered tablets, or of Vivian Lyn's cylindrical towers of paper (both from New Zealand), then these three very subtle works might have been negotiated for display in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The non-involvement of the local art-museum was remarked on by the New Zealanders, who remembered the substantial involvement of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery at Christchurch during the previous Anzart.

There was also an object art exhibition, *Not a Picture Show: Exhibition of Usages of Photography*, held by Tasmanian artists in

the Community and Art Centre premises in Salamanca Place. It served to underline the now well-known environmental concern of most Tasmanian artists, to show the work of the local artists most involved with Anzart-in-Hobart, and to display the first new works by John Armstrong seen for a couple of years — in short to display the special qualities of peculiarly Hobart art in works of sometimes considerable artistic excellence.

What else? It was good to spend time again with New Zealand art-critic and poet Wystan Curnow and worry about all those words in New Zealand painting (and in Olivier Burckardt's slide-projection performance). I put it down to literature — the most portable art-medium, being until recently the only art-form that could reach New Zealand (the end of the European world) in examples of the highest quality — and to painting, the least portable. It was good to see Arthur and Corinne Cantrill still at their unique film-art, good to see Richard Tipping still at his Southern Cross light-pieces, this time at dusk on the Organ Pipes near the top of Mount Wellington (typically it was the only piece the public and the media knew well; and not many locals actually looked uphill to see it on the mountain, but they did see it on television). It was good to find rare books and magazines from New Zealand, from Praxis (Perth) and from the Experimental Art Foundation (Adelaide) in the Anzart shop, and records by New Zealand's music-performance artist Philip Dadson. It was good to get a focus, for the first time, on the new recession art cooperatives, and to realise that a lot of their energy, now in Sydney and Hobart, is energy that has recently emigrated from Adelaide. That includes the Anzart-in-Hobart director, Leigh Hobba.

Most of all it was good to know that very good new work continues to be done by



Maura Chamberlain and Derek Kreckler, Desire, Not a Dingo, performance Old Hobart Mail Exchange, Hobart, 1983.

established experimental artists, for example Andrew Drummond, Bo Jones and Stephen Turpie (Turpie's installation-piece was one of a number of works to acknowledge the fishing industry, and in his case also the fishy smells, of Hobart). And it was good to know that new artists of considerable promise exist, and are toughing out the recession. Good luck to Juilee Pryor, Michael Hill, Rob McDonald and Belinda Holland, and to the many I didn't meet.



Hardened Arteries, performance outside the Mercury offices, Hobart, 1983.