



Australian Perspecta 1997

Between art & nature

Various Galleries

August - September, 1997

Sydney



Kyle Ashpole, *Perspecta 97*,
cement, sandstone, plants,
pebbles, dim var.,
1997

In her foreword to the catalogue, Victoria Lynn explains the title of the 1997 *Perspecta* in the following way. *Between Art and Nature*:

suggests that there are many ways to understand the relationship of art and nature against the backdrop of the long history of their cultural interchange. The parameters set out by the title have been interpreted variously by the artists, curators and writers in the catalogue: that which lies between art and nature can be a mediation, an intercession, a communion, a conciliation or an intervention.¹

Why, in the 90s, and within an event that purports to "survey the latest trends in contemporary Australian art"² are we still bound, constricted, and restricted by the opposition of nature to culture? The answers we find are determined by the questions we ask, and so long as we ask about the intercession, intersection and intervention of culture and nature, we will never get an answer which does not reproduce the very opposition it asks about. Within such a scenario artists always play the part of culture, as its flag bearers, its guilty consciences, its innovators or its criminals. This tiredly moralistic concept of culture codetermines nature as similarly simplistic, oppositional, and consequently always already beyond the reach of art. You play nature to my culture, and this dialectical generative act gives birth to obedient children who can do no more than forever repeat their parental mistakes;

nature/culture/nature/culture/nature/culture/nature

...

Make no mistake: culture IS nature, teeming with a vibrant, mutant, ever-changing life. A life which is no longer human, nor inhuman, outside of all anthropomorphic caricatures. If we are to find out anything about this life and its art - if we are to experience its generative energy - then we must ask questions which can recognise its existence. Such questions would themselves be alive; other than and unanswered by the deadly

boredom of the dialectic. That the art institution remains a dialectical exemplar is no surprise, justifying as it does the institutions continued existence. The museum gallery is the very vehicle and container (that is, the mechanism of definition, with all its petty controversies and fashions) of culture itself. There is nothing between art and nature because both art and nature only start to get interesting when they refer to the same thing.

Luckily enough, there were some artists in *Perspecta* who understood this. Not surprisingly, they were young, and exhibited out west at Casula, well away from the institutional centres. This satellite show was called *Fibro*. Taken as a whole, it was less than inspiring, but within the ranks there were some exceptions, some signs of life. They came from a small group of artists who have often exhibited together, and whose work shares many concerns: Kyle Ashpole, Tony Schwensen, David Thomas, Regina Walter and Justene Williams. None of their works had anything to say about what was between art and nature, in fact their work is disinterested in making any statements at all. Their work isn't about anything in the sense that an art work might say something, have an opinion, argue rationally (or irrationally), represent, mediate, or just generally have an object such as nature. Their work both *is* something, and *does* something, this distinction collapsing into a generative life; a performative ontology.



Tony Schwensen, *Australia*
A (here's hoping), treated
pine, concrete, plastic,
metal 120 x 240 x
60 cm 1997

Ashpole's floor-hugging sculpture was made from reinforcing steel sitting on reinforcement spacers. Concrete had been poured through the framework and set as a formless lump amidst live power cords that snaked and tangled themselves around the sculpture. Schwensen's fat backyard retaining wall was anchored by big plastic buckets filled with concrete, forming two open parallel walls in the shape of a square. Thomas simply drew two interlocking diamonds with black gaffer tape on the towering end wall, and painted the small diamond centre of their intersection a most delicate lemon. This motif was taken directly from a suburban garage door. William's installation had a plastic McDonalds umbrella table surrounded by photographs of a rubbish tin, a strange children's doll, and a couple of blurry abstracts. And Walter's bead pictures of domestic settings were back-lit and placed in pre-existing windows.

The first commonality here is a low-tech approach to materials (William's uses a throw-away camera, and her shots are, by both arty and popular standards, oddly everyday). Secondly, there is a low-tech approach to manufacture. There is nothing

particularly cultured about these works, which are composed of cheap, grungy materials, in a fairly light way. Indeed, these works are already *things* (Walter's window beads are modelled on pot-stands), and their mundane, mass-produced aesthetic demonstrates little concern for making grand Art statements. Almost too cool to talk, these works embody a silent vernacular. There is no interest in virtuosity, here where technique is simply what makes art work. The work keeps the context from which its elements come very much alive, adjusting it in terms of that through which it passes. And in being turned into art works this uncanny displacement of the everyday does not exemplify the gap the work thereby traverses from low to high culture, but displaces this gap itself. There is no more distinction between high and low art. This comfortable and relaxed work has no pretensions, no interest in thinking theoretical binaries, it just takes joy in its empirical self-evidence. It is, finally, process.

It sounds dumb to claim these works are somehow processual in themselves, as if they were changing or living before us in any way other than that of the minuscule transitions of their perception and materiality. The implication of ditching the ontology of a nature/culture distinction and the coordinates from which these works are generated (which I am arguing is the same thing), is that these works are alive with unstable and intense forces. But how are we to understand these forces? Certainly not as impersonal, or as transcendent of the coordinates from which they are produced. The art works I am privileging are not to be imagined as separate from their artists. An intervention was required to produce the work, but it was an intervention that implicated the artist and art work in a new styling of production itself. And just because it was produced by and in the life of the artist there is no reason to think of such a life as human. In avoiding the over determined space on offer by the museum's nature/culture paradigm, the force evident in these works sets off for new horizons. The question of what these new coordinates of existence might be, is the problem posed by these works and it is precisely this question which would be the sign of life.

Stephen Zepke
October 1997

Endnotes

1. *Between Art & Nature: 1997 Australian Perspectives*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1997, p.7
2. *ibid.*

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