

Heart of Darkness

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Anne Gray (ed.)

AUSTRALIAN ART IN THE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

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IN 1996 NICHOLAS SEROTA, Director of the Tate Gallery, London, delivered the twenty-eighth annual Walter Neurath Memorial lecture, a series developed in honour of the founder of Thames & Hudson. Titled *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art*, Serota's lecture focuses specifically on the curatorial rationale for the display of collections of art and corresponding interpretative frameworks that extend visitors' interaction with art and ideas. In his précis to the published lecture, Serota pays homage to Neurath's art publishing — specifically the *World of Art* series — noting that his commitment to excellent writing and the quality of reproductions has 'profoundly encouraged appreciation of the visual arts'. Serota's homage was based on his personal introduction to, and enduring enthusiasm for, the visual arts. He argues that the corollary of imaginative publishing based on original research, such as that championed by Neurath, is the dramatic increase 'not only in the number, but also in the sophistication, of visitors to our museums'.

I have cited Nicholas Serota in introducing this review of an Australian book specifically because, at the Tate, he has directed a highly successful and stimulating programme of textual interpretation of the collection. The Tate's interpretative texts adhere to principles of public accessibility and concision, though not at the expense of scholarship or exploratory thought. Serota's programme correlates with what he identified in *Experience or Interpretation* as a growing international trend in the collaboration between artists, curators and cultural historians in the business of elaborating the contexts in which works of art occur and are encountered.

In the twenty years since the National Gallery of Australia was opened to the public, the writing of Australian art histories has changed fundamentally. An increasing tendency towards the integration of concurrent but disparate art practices, and the inclusion of multiple voices and divergent perspectives, have recently resulted in a series of thought-provoking anthologies in contrast to conventional, though certainly no less important, single-author publications. The catalysts for this change in approach are as complex and varied as the field of art practices. The public thirst for interpretation of works of art is arguably one of the most influential shifts in recent art history writing and associated curatorial practice.

This takes me back to Serota's point. Since 1982 the didactic role of the NGA and other art museums has helped to

cultivate a sophisticated and demanding audience. The importance placed on access and interpretation can be linked also to the governmental and public scrutiny under which art museums function, and to the expanding constituencies to which cultural institutions are accountable.

Australian Art in the National Gallery of Australia is the most recent of a range of publications to focus on the permanent collections of some of Australia's major art museums. A notable predecessor to this book is the Queensland Art Gallery's *Brought to Light: Australian Art 1850–1965*. In the latter volume, Doug Hall reasserts the vital traditions of research and publishing in art museums, particularly in relation to the commercial, professional or industry imperatives that, as he notes, have seen art museums become 'intensely exhibition driven', sometimes at the expense of the deserved profile of their permanent collections.

The NGA book is broad in its coverage of history, encompassing more than 400 works from 1773 to 2002. It is possibly the largest anthology of its type. Anne Gray immediately reveals the aspirations of the publication with a wonderful opening quote from James Gleeson, which seems just as apt for the reader as for the viewer:

At the heart of every great work of art lies an area of darkness that defies analysis. Theorists try, but something of the greatest works always elude the pursuer ... It is not whether you have understood exactly what the artist had in mind, but whether or not it has stirred your imagination into a creative act.

Gray has ordered the book in seven chronological periods from 'Pre-colonial and Colonial 1770–1884', through the major social and aesthetic forces that have shaped creative practices, to 'Art Now 1990–2002'. It is, as Gray states, primarily a visual survey, and the juxtaposition of works throughout maintains a particular ethos that has informed the display of the collection since Daniel Thomas was foundation head of the Australian Art Department from 1978 to 1984. He set in train what is now an established principle for the integrated display of works in all media. Attention is given to diverse practices that represent Australian art and social development. Most importantly, this book also emphasises the commitment of the NGA to a wide-ranging, insightful and sustained collections programme.

This is a weighty volume, literally. It is cumbersome to read in bed, but a great read nonetheless. It profiles the collection and orders a history of Australian art in a way that, along with the expected icons, enables rather obscure works, and artists not widely known, to enter a broader public sphere and to be the subject of new research. Gray has assembled 139 writers, of whom almost seventy are living artists. The collaboration between the NGA, its curators and contemporary artists is particularly evident. One of the great benefits of including the voices of so many artists is that most of their texts emphasise the depth and breadth of their own research in the ongoing theoretical and formal development of their work. As someone working in the field of contemporary art,

I find that the role of artists and the relevance of their practices to contemporary societies need to be consistently reasserted to the broadest possible audience. The inclusion of so many in this NGA book provides provocative, unexpected and sometimes very amusing perspectives.

The anthology has been astutely edited for a general readership, with the writing pared back and devoid of artspeak. Texts range from 250 to 750 words, and are as varied as the works themselves. The complexity of original ideas and social and cultural contexts that can be packed into 250 words is inspiring. Much in this volume is focused on individual artists and works that will provoke more in-depth research for the art student and general reader alike. At the other end of the scale, the 750-word texts are, as Daniel Thomas recently said to me, a special literary form that allows enough room to scrutinise closely a work of art and the ways in which it came into being.

Oscillating between the intensely personal and uncompromisingly political, *Australian Art in the National Gallery of Australia* is an excellent contribution to the published histories of Australian art. It asserts the importance of our artists and the necessity and overwhelming quality of the national collection.