
Stephanie Radok is an Australian artist and art writer. *An Opening*, recently longlisted for the Stella Prize, is her first book.

Writing about another woman’s writing about memories of the art that has shaped her life in small and large ways may be seen as art, or life, at several removes: a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy, a blurred and degraded imitation. And yet, of course, art is no mere imitation of life but the creation of something new. It may shock, lure, or persuade an audience into seeing something afresh or experiencing life differently. The current fashion in the visual arts is to shock, or conversely, as Nicholas Jose puts it, to be ‘off-putting and hermetic.’¹ Writers of non-fiction, on the other hand, often favour the gentle art of persuasion. But Stephanie Radok’s writing lures the reader into an alternate reality which, magically, becomes our own. Like the nest of a bird, or a drawing made by the careful accretion of many lines, this book constructs a welcoming space that invites stillness, contemplation, and perhaps incubation.

Jose describes *An Opening* as ‘a memoir wrapped around a discussion of art and a discussion of art wrapped around a memoir in such a way that makes the two indistinguishable’.² A collection of essays assembled like a calendar, one for each month of the year, it dances between past and present, object and idea, personal and poetic modes, noting the passage of time and the complexities of memory. These are not merely personal, but lyric essays, a form which

partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.³

The style of these essays is lucid and direct, grounded in sensory experience and in the rhythms of ordinary daily events like taking the dog for a walk. Radok’s calm insistence that art is both personal and political pervades every paragraph. It is a book by an artist and lover of art about looking, about thinking, about making connections, and about love. ‘It is what artworks make people feel or think that is important, not how much they cost or even who made them’ (3). Strange, isn’t it, that this needs to be said? Radok shows how art reaches deeply into our lives in unexpected and ordinary ways: the tattered calendar cutting kept for decades and left behind in a photocopier, the postcard stuck to a laundry wall, or the persistent memory of something, seen perhaps only briefly, that alters one’s thinking utterly. This book is also, however, an astute commentary on art in Australia and internationally by a respected writer already influential, through her catalogue essays and articles, in the perception and criticism of and theorising about art, especially migrant and Australian Indigenous art, for which Radok has a particular passion.

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¹ Nicholas Jose, back cover blurb, *An Opening*.
In discussing a work by artist Elizabeth Gertzakis (111-12), Radok observes that ‘somehow this personal story becomes exemplary of anyone’s story … It … uses ordinary everyday experience as the subject for art, which is to say it reveals commonplace personal experience to be culture.’ Furthermore, ‘it establishes an intimacy with the reader so that their interior voice too is felt as potentially shared or shareable’ (113). An Opening also does this. The book is itself a work of art, a cocoon of memoir and observations about particular artworks that welcomes readers to likewise remember and muse upon the relationships we form with art, whether directly or via reproductions, momentary or enduring, and how those relationships influence our lives.

Daniel Thomas writes that Radok’s ‘contribution to Australian art is idiosyncratic and determinedly marginal’. It is ironic that such writing can be called marginal – even, as here, with a positive spin. Rather, it ought to be called essential, for it reclaims art as personal territory, celebrating the connections between our ordinary life and our aspirations, the moments of tenderness and intimations of (im)mortality that haunt even ordinary people, and the talents human beings harbour for wonder, truth, generosity, and creation.

Michele McCrea

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4 Daniel Thomas, back cover blurb, An Opening.