

REPORT FROM DOWN UNDER: ANZART

Australia-New Zealand Art Encounter, August 1981

Spaces are greater in the Southern hemisphere, there's less in them. Christchurch, in New Zealand—or Auckland, where I'm writing this—is further from Sydney, Australia, than London, England is from Moscow in the USSR. And Sydney itself is not much nearer Adelaide, nor Melbourne nearer Brisbane, than Christchurch is near to either city. The point is this is a part of the world which contains a number of isolated centers and no single, dominant focus.

In 1961, the small town of Mildura, in the State of Victoria, 250 miles north of Melbourne, held its first Sculpture Triennial. Up until 1978, when it held its last, Mildura was *the* meeting ground as far as the art of the region was concerned. Apart from attracting work from all over Australia, the Triennial initiated a Trans-Tasman (the Tasman being the sea which separates Australia and New Zealand) connection which has subsequently grown in importance. Certain for New Zealand; for since 1975 some fifty New Zealand sculptors and performance artists have been seen in Australia, New Zealanders have become a permanent part of the Sydney Biennale and their work is regularly featured in the Australian magazine, *Art Network*. ANZART was an attempt to repay this Australian hospitality and to generate fuller dialogue. It entailed bringing artists, as well as their art, together. Mildura had itself been something of a gathering point, but almost all the participating artists attended ANZART. Moreover, many of them gave slide talks on their recent work which served to put their contributions into context. And these, plus a panel discussion, plus four lectures, made ANZART as much a conference as an exhibition, or 'festival' of work.

Performances were presented by Ray Woollard, Steven Turpie, Bonita Ely, Jacek Grzelecki, Mike Parr, Graeme Davis, Dom di Clario, Wendy Teakle and David Jenz (Australia), From Scratch, Peter Roche and Linda Buis, David Mealing, Collen Anstey, Di Ffrench (New Zealand), Claire Fergusson (a New Zealand expatriate based in New York) and Ulay and Marina Abramovic (Holland). These, taken together with all the talks, films, video and concerts, meant that captive audience situations dominated what was a structured program which ran, some days, from ten in the morning until midnight. That was not a bad thing. Shared experiences accumulated quickly and provided plenty to talk about. Had it been less structured, or had exhibitions dominated, ANZART would have been less concretely a shared experience. And had the weather let up, had it been less cold, less wet, and all of us less pressed together out of the weather, wanting coffee, against it would have been less that.

Performance of its nature tends to disrupt the conventions of captive audience situations. Duration, venue, starting time—each is more likely to be determined by the concept of the particular work rather than by convention or audience convenience. The performances varied in length from Di Ffrench's 30 minute *Fontanel* to Graeme Davis' *Drum, Rim, Rim, Rim, Rim, Rim*, which went on all night and Dom di Clario's piano piece which ran from 10 - 4, two days running (with lunch breaks). With the lengthier works one was, of course, more or less free to come and go, to work out a fitting attention span or pattern. Simply by attending ANZART one did, in a sense, become captive. One was there for

it, full-time. Peter Roche and Linda Buis performed their piece at dawn, Ulay and Marina Abramovic waited for dusk—their piece ended when they were no longer visible to their audience. Most of us are accustomed to performances being occasional one-off events, experiences several at day (at all hours) for a week was unusual and not without its effects. The need to stay more active than captive was more pressing. Not only did the medium come to feel more manipulative than usual, but one performance tended to affect another sometimes powerfully distorting expectations of it.

Those works which tied themselves firmly to the physical context seemed to succeed best. That context was pretty insistent—Christchurch's Arts Centre occupies what was until some years ago the downtown campus of the University of Canterbury. Built early in the century, it is composed of relatively small but handsome stone complexes interspersed with grass quadrangles and cloisters. It was along the ledges of two cloisters which are at right angles to one another that Peter Roche and Linda Buis performed their piece. Buis lay covered in a blanket (it was over her head as well) at one end and then crawled, still with the blanket over her head, along the foot-wide ledge towards the other, while Roche paced the length of the other ledge alternately lighting and snuffing out the candles that were set at either end. The installations of the Australian artists Ken Mortensen and Jacek Grzelecki in the boiler house were both examples of opportunism making good—where context and art began or ended was, properly, difficult to say. Mike Parr, in his *Glenellaba (The Hill above the town of Childhood)*, neatly used a former office and classroom to reinstate schooling. And Ulay and Marina Abramovic used the body of the Great Hall—an elegant, high-ceilinged, lead-light-windowed hall—leaving the stage to the audience. Ulay sat furthest from view in the lotus position throughout while Marina stood, on a pedestal, between him and the stage and near the windows. She pointed at Ulay until she could no longer. Then she pointed again. Then again. Occasionally, she would turn at the waist to point at the audience. That was all, for some three hours, while the angle of the afternoon sun slowly changed and then the light slowly went. *Witnessing*, as it was called, instilled such a hush in that Great Hall that when I came away it was as if it had settled over the whole of Christchurch. This certainly was the most moving work at ANZART, and it was one which clearly suggested the impact on their work of the time recently spent in the Australian desert.

The group From Scratch had rehearsed their piece, *Tasman-Pacific (Triad IV)*, in the volcanic crater of Auckland's Mt. Eden. So they brought it, not to the Arts Centre, but to an unused quarry in the Port Hills on the edge of town. Those hills then reverberated to the sounds of bass drums, and when the quarry did disclose itself the three performers were to be found deep in a conversation of drums, voices, and movements. Heading out from one another (to higher, middle, or lower ground) and back, shouting out (some thesis, antithesis, synthesis) on megaphones, making and breaking drum rhythms, their conversation was in fact an improvised dialectic which eventually drew its audience down from the rim to join them on the quarry floor.

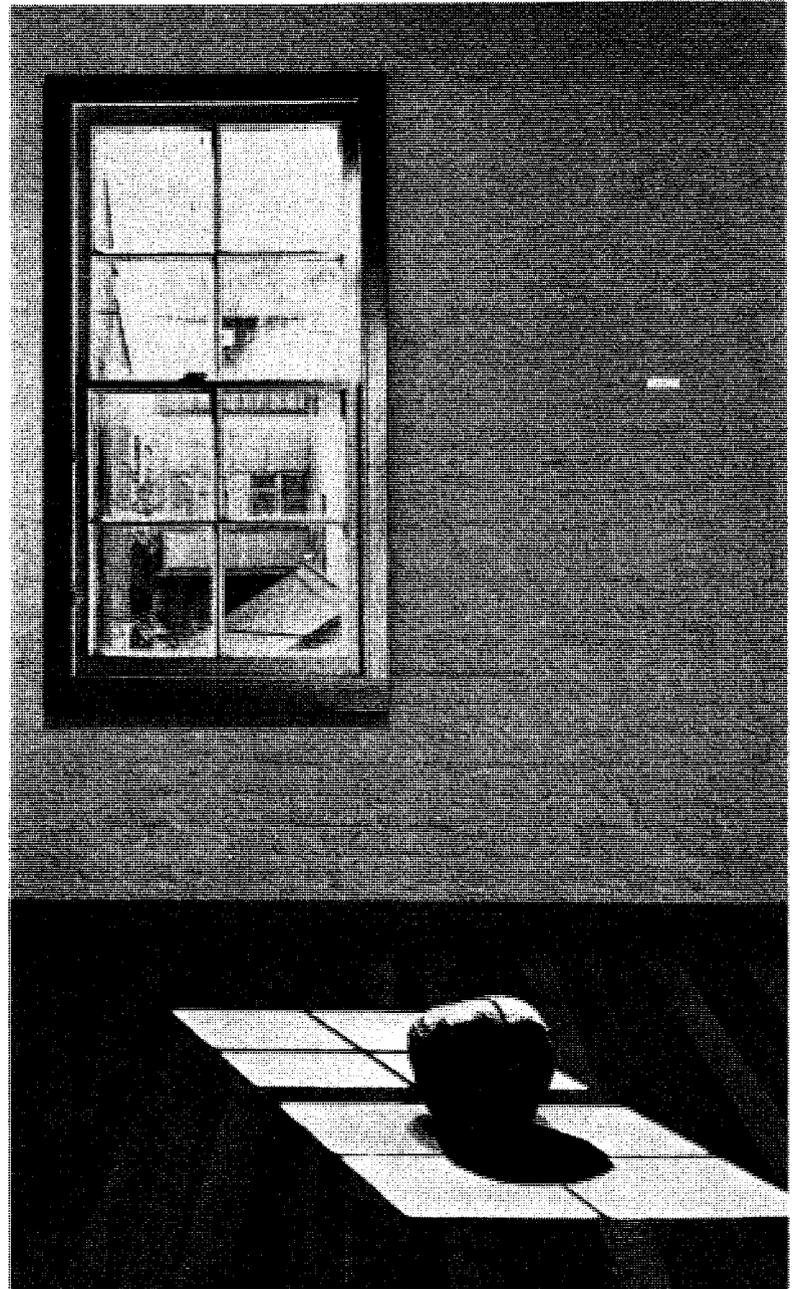
Those performances which took less heed than these of location and audience—usually in the name of 'content'—

did so at a price. Claire Fergusson's *Y-Z* was a congestion of props and stage busyness, and Bonita Ely's *Breadline* was musclebound with metaphor and message. Steven Turpie's *Revisiting the Abandoned Journey Against, No. 2* and Jacek Grzelecki's *The Message* were both powerful pieces of stage machinery making their bid for freedom from the theatre. But I wasn't convinced they had succeeded.

ANZART was not all performance. There were outdoor installations; Geoff Lloyd's compass piece which aligned Christchurch with Adelaide, being the most accomplished of these. There was a program of Australian video, which is now touring New Zealand. Largely as the result of a network of Access Centres established under the Whitlam Government, Australian video is in a healthy state. There was an exhibition of static work at the Robert MacDougal Art Gallery—mostly photographs and installations. Among these Dale Franks' *New Image* drawings stood out, as did Robert Owen's installation *Hiatus* and his two very elegant sequences of color photographs. There was a display of artists' books and a (disappointing) afternoon of New Zealand films.

That painting was largely absent from ANZART was in good part an inheritance of the seventies resurgence of sculpture and the 'alternative' media it spawned. That resurgence brought forward a succession of energetic curators who were either themselves artists or had a special ability to work closely with them. It attracted public funding for work which stood outside of the commercial nexus and for events such as the Mildura Triennial and ANZART which was devoted to such work. Last year Ian Hunter visited Australia to study the support for alternative media there and to investigate the possibilities of further Trans-Tasman exchanges. ANZART was his idea; he organized it with the help of artists and art students. Hunter himself has no museum affiliation. It was funded by the Visual Arts Board of Australia, the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand and the Australia/New Zealand Foundation. So it was not the least of ANZART's contributions that it demonstrated how an international art event could be initiated and organized independently of the museum system.

—Wystan Curnow
University of Auckland



LOWER LEFT: Peter Roche & Linda Buis
Performance
ABOVE: Robert Owen, Installation: *Hiatus*