

From The Field – *du Champ*

Nigel Lendon Alan Oldfield Eric Shirley

SNO continued to research The Field exhibition in mid-2014. It was the work of Wendy Paramor that ignited our interest, as her estate was housed close by at Casula Powerhouse Art Centre. It was the ease of access to the entire scope of her oeuvre and archive of personal papers that made Paramor such an attractive subject to us. We were surprised that SNO, an artist-run initiative then operating a space in the inner west suburb of Marrickville, was able to borrow some of her paintings and sculptures to exhibit in the first and second Returning to The Field (RTF) exhibitions.

RTF 1 (SNO 106) comprised 2 basic curatorial components. The first was the work of 7 senior Australian artists, all of whom had participated in The Field exhibition in 1968. As well as Paramor, project 106 included works by Trevor Vickers, Gunter Christmann, Robert Jacks, Nigel Lendon, Michael Johnson and Sydney Ball. Our aim was not to duplicate the now iconic works of 1968 but, if it were possible, to show pieces that were created earlier, during or after that captivating date of 1968. As a counterpoint to this canonised, venerated and acclaimed exhibition we searched for available alternative works by these participants. Secondly, we approached 7 contemporary artists: 6 female painters and sculptors and one male artist. In this way part of the selection strategy aimed to balance the genders. Curiously the idea of a gender-balanced exhibition was not the case in 1968. Not dwelling on corrective revisionism, RTF 1 explored other avenues from 'the field' of practice, finding examples of performance-for-video, sound construction, concrete poetry, collage and installation. None of these art forms had appeared in the earlier National Gallery of Victoria's Finemore/Stringer curatorial selection. SNO's ambition was to create a composite argument that looked to the ongoing future or, as stated in our notes, 'set up very useful coordinates, some that will renew the language of abstraction, and others that might expand the field altogether in related directions.' In this sense the 14 artists positioned in the galleries might produce a set of conversations and draw numerous lines and divergences performed by the various fields of the works.

This curatorial premise was faceted by a sequence of key points. We tried to imagine, if we returned today to create a revision of The Field, what we could include in a contemporary kind of renewal and revision while (a) still maintaining the focus on formalism and non-objective abstraction and (b) expanding the field to include works and ideas that were produced or performed in the post-analogue era.

On reflection, RTF 1 & 2 were both anti-revisionist exhibitions. The current work assembled in RTF 3 also does not revise or attempt to assert the artefact in terms of the historic event, however great that temptation might be. This third RTF show focuses on works by 3 Field artists that dispensed with or emerged out of the aspirations that so defined the apparent consistency of the moment of 1968.

Given the passing of time we decided to make a critical list of shortcomings of some aspects of the original Field exhibition. SNO playfully worked with these criticisms to form its own alternative exhibition outcomes. Our exhibition notes for SNO 106 begin with a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein's final book, *Remarks on Colour*. "A language-game: Report whether a certain body is lighter or darker than another. – But know there's a

related one: State the relationship between lightness of certain shades of colour. (Compare with this: Determining the relationship between the lengths of two sticks –and the relationship between two numbers.) – The form of the propositions in both language games is the same: “X is lighter than Y”. But in the first it is an external relation and the proposition is temporal, in the second it is an internal relation and the proposition is timeless.”

Having this proposition in mind we started to navigate and collate arrangements of distinct tendencies that might reinforce particular related properties in others. Awareness of the informal and unlimited outcomes that such a language-game might play out required further resources not necessarily at our disposal. From these kinds of curatorial experiments SNO has gone on to design and write for a larger museum curatorial proposition. Using such an approach we hoped to produce an experience that was open and unorthodox, based on a module system that could be balanced, inclusive and radical in terms of revisionism and be revolutionary. The contemporary sense of this is to encourage an open system, one that can refresh the reading of formalist non-objective abstract art today.

In 2017 we again returned to The Field (SNO 122) with a refocused selection of 11 female artists. This time SNO 122 accessed works by The Field artists Normana Wight, Janet Dawson and Wendy Paramor and sought paintings by the West Australian Carol Rudyard and South Australian Margaret Worth, both of whom many say were overlooked for selection in the original 1968 show. Keen to include the historically absent indigenous Australian voice, we decided to include the concrete poetry of Bengitj Ngurruwuthun. Wanting to expand from the internal relationships we had discovered by focusing on The Field exhibition in our RTF 1 project, SNO discovered that artists such as Gunter Christmann, Michael Nicholson and Nigel Lendon had also worked in a more *informal* way with sound, poetry, performance and video which gave us the track to follow artists like dancer-choreographer Philippa Cullen who was very much their contemporary. Pieces by Cullen such as *Utter* (1972), a movement work for 5 performers and a vocalist, created some of the earliest interactive performance environments with video and projections, sound poetry and body-activated electronic sound/music. Tracing the non-objective abstract tendency from outside the conventional forms of gallery-oriented art works, as in the emerging new media or extending to literature, dance and sound/music and video, pointed us further towards a less formal gallery engagement and use of traditional materials. This had become more commonly possible in contemporary art practice in the years directly following 1968.

In August 2018 The Field exhibition will be 50 years old. This year the National Gallery of Victoria has begun plans to present The Field Revisited. The exhibition is to be reconstructed as an exercise in curatorial revision and, as they say, ‘The Field was a ground-breaking and controversial exhibition in Australian art history – a radical showcase of abstract and conceptual, colour field, geometric and hard edge paintings and sculpture that opened the new building on St Kilda Road in 1968.’

At this stage SNO has arrived at a new curatorial model, one that is truly radical, intergenerational, interdisciplinary and multi-faceted, that continues the aim of researching both Australian and international non-objective and formalist abstract art of the past, the present and into the future. Like the many artists-run initiatives before it, spaces like Central Street Gallery, Inhibodress, Store 5, CBD Gallery and AC4CA, SNO is committed

to managing and exploring alternative curatorial methods with a non-commercial outlook, managed by a non-authoritarian volunteer collective system that is genuinely consultative and research based.

All the ARIs listed and the others that are yet to come are the engine rooms and incubators of experimentation and innovation in contemporary art. Much of the museum 'documentation' of contemporary art is managed in the same way as it has always been in the past. By their nature, the institutions of art engage in and enforce particular narratives that have worked toward a culture separated from life. In our earlier notes for RTF 1, SNO noted that 30 years ago the artists Lendon and Ian Burn, in their collaborative essay 'Purity, style, amnesia' (published in *The Field Now* catalogue, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne 1984), speculated on what the major legacy the event of 1968 brought to Australian art. 'The rhetoric of "the new" and the "logic" of an institutionalised avant-garde were legitimised by The Field exhibition and subsequently reproduced in the survey exhibitions, project shows and biennales, in the acceptance of the idea of an avant-garde by the major institutions, in the Australia Council and in the collecting policies of the Australian National Gallery. To concentrate therefore on the "look" of the exhibition is misleading. Rather, the institutional sponsorship of an "avant-garde" context for contemporary art in Australia was itself the major initiative of The Field.' This tended to result in a national culture that 'is particularly repressive, undifferentiated and intolerant,' as Peter O'Brien observed (in *Other Voices* Vol.1 No.2 1970, a journal of art, music and critical theory associated with Central Street Gallery).

The opening exhibition at the new NGV building in 1968 is usually described as a watershed moment ushering in a new era of contemporary art in Australia. It might be said to have represented the mantra of the moment, the point where the international art platform started seriously casting the Australian product. Local art had at last come of age. This was an exciting time globally. Others described The Field as an art worthy of the space age, for the walls were wallpapered silver and the larger-scale works that dominated hovered vibrating to create a unique composite environment. The distinctive blue stone building was opened along with The Field exhibition on 20 & 22 August 1968. The new gallery, brutalist in style, was designed by Sir Roy Grounds for which he was awarded the Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal. It is a monolithic building and one of a group of structures designed by Grounds to form Melbourne's St Kilda Road arts-precinct, regarded by many as the Melbourne rival to Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House masterpiece and Harry Seidler's Australia Square. Architecturally speaking, the brutalist building was a perfect match for hard-edge and colour field painting and sculpture.

Returning to The Field 3 is an exhibition celebrating 3 of the original Field artists. Each of these artists have had somewhat outsider roles to play, which is evident in the works developed in the 4 years following the historic moment. Using Bernard Smith's formulaic definition of style, Oldfield is a neo-modernist, Shirley is a relational painter and Lendon's sculptural mode is unitary or modular. Perhaps all definitions are flawed as there are always exceptions to the rule. Smith's definition was useful when examining the various trends of the group of painters that showed at Central Street Gallery from 1966 onward.

Nigel Lendon (born 1944) is primarily known as a sculptor who has worked in expanded fields of formalist sculpture and performance, photography and video. He is also well known as a curator and researcher.

The early work of **Alan Oldfield** (1943-2004) 'was characterised by crisp clean abstract paintings which combined a hedonist sensibility with the austerity of hard edge abstraction. His later paintings were in a more meditative style influenced by Italian Renaissance art and his deep and abiding religious faith. He was also active as a theatre set designer.' In an interview with James Gleeson in 1979 Oldfield remarked, 'I was never a typical Central Street painter in that sense. I think I painted about six Hard Edge paintings. That's all. However, I think the influence shows, the Hard Edge technique shows even in what I do now.'

We know very little about **Eric Shirley** (1919-2008). Born almost a century ago he was one of the oldest artists to exhibit in The Field. He was a painter, graphic artist and art director in advertising. The critic Paul McGillick remarked that Shirley in part was drawn to Central Street initially through the advertising business that was run upstairs in the same building.

After The Field, the 3 artists went in very different directions. This might say something about the myth that the watershed exhibition was designed to show a unified group or set of tendencies or a cohesive moment in the historical narrative of Australian art. Very few of the artists of 1968 maintained what SNO calls The Project. As Donald Brook suggested, 'Not that the answer to academicism . . . is simply to abandon the monument and go into the field . . . One must do it somehow with authority.' Those that stayed the course to mine the non-objective and formalist project were Paramor, Lendon, Vickers, Robert Hunter, Clement Meadmore, Robert Rooney and perhaps Shirley. By 1970 Smith had written extensively on many of the artists from The Field, even going so far as to claim of the Sydney artists, 'Curiously enough there have only been two real *avant-garde* groups in the whole history of Australian art: the group of young painters who introduced impressionism to Australia with their 9 x 5 Impressions in 1889, and Central Street.'

In 2010 SNO mounted 2 homage-style exhibitions related to Central Street artists – Folk 2: Assemblage No.4 (SNO 56) and From New Abstraction To Post-Formalism (SNO 61) – and in 2016 SNO showed 2 new works by Nigel Lendon, the timber sculpture *Black Hole* (2014) and the performance-for-video *Untitled Drawing (Elasticus)* (2013-14), a work that relates to another one of his ready-mades shown in an earlier project, SNO 39. In 1971 Donald Brook, writing in a review called 'From the monument to The Field', gave a prophetic account of one of Lendon's pieces related to the current SNO 142 performance-for-video piece called *Untitled Systemic Structure 69-2* (now in the collection of the Mildura Art Centre): 'One thing that lies behind all five of these entities (they can only with reservation be called objects) is their implicit reaction against the custom of taking works of art to be individual, hermetic monuments, aesthetically isolated from one another and discontinuous from their surrounding context.' Brook further observed that 'Lendon's work is built out of connected, similar (but not identical) elements, like beads or knitting, that hang together and are so adjusted to their architectural context that one might find it hard to say where the boundaries of aesthetic attention are to be drawn. They are the very antithesis of monuments.' This still reverberates today. Lendon's elegant environmentally-set *Untitled Drawing (Elasticus)* made some 45 years later has traces of all the properties Brook is seeing and describing in the unitary, modular systems that continue to inform much of his more recent works and actions.

Soon after 1968 contemporary art shifted swiftly into a sustained decade-long phase of experimentalism. All 3 artists in SNO 142 had shown at Central Street in the late 1960s

and early 1970s. The idea that this early artist-run initiative was an engine house that tested innovation and investigation, both in terms of aesthetics and its social implications at a time of late global imperialism, was significant. The boldness of the program effectively had moved on from the monumentalism so prevalent in the work many of the artists had shown in The Field. The Australian avant-garde after The Field was not just a continuum of a new academy of the plastic arts, but a pluralistic shift into post-object art, electronic and computer music, performance art, video, dance, design and non-objective poetry. It was a creative atmosphere of cross-art forms and interdisciplinary practice. These threads do differentiate how and why an art scene, the place where artists and audiences alike come together, enter a more tolerant non-authoritarian cooperative exhibition environment which can be modelled and programmed and critically understood. It is these sorts of conditions and outcomes that SNO has focussed on and examined closely in recent years.

Returning to The Field has been a rewarding series of exhibitions for SNO. Each of these projects has generated ongoing discussions and created significant curatorial strategies to use in the future. The gallery has planned further exhibitions and performances through 2018 that are pilot projects leading up to a major touring museum show and publication to open at Casula Powerhouse Art Centre in April 2019. The working title of this large exhibition is called Field Notes 1968-2018.

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See SNO.org.au for

Exhibition 106 RTF #1 essay,

Room sheets for Exhibitions 106 & 122 are also available to view