

ON ARTISTS

WRITING HISTORIES OF AUSTRALIAN ART CRITICISM: THE SACRED IN ART IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Michael Denholm

*This paper is dedicated to all those who thwart and suppress
our dreams and desires*

In late 1987, as I was coming to the end of co-editing, for a decade, the literary magazine *Island*, I travelled to Europe for seven weeks to look at art in art museums. In London I read Geoff Dyer's study of the art critic John Berger, *Ways Of Telling, The Work Of John Berger*. I decided that my future lay in the visual arts, that there was a need for similar studies to be written of Australian art criticism.

In 1989, I was appointed to the position of Curator of Australian Literature, University College Library, Australian Defence Force Academy. Moving to Canberra, I began to write a trio of books on Australian art history, including a history of Australian art magazines, 1963 to 1996, and a history of Australian art criticism, 1950 to 1996. Writing in cafes and restaurants before and after work, late at night, after the cafes or restaurants had closed, I would often walk through a wide section of open land which became for me a sacred place, where, mostly alone (except one night when I was surrounded by a pack of dogs) I could commune with the night, with the moon, the stars, and, especially, the quiet rustling of leaves. It was then that I began to read the German philosopher Heidegger.

For Heidegger art is concerned with the origin of 'truth of what is... To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of the source of its nature is a founding leap - this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, primal leap) means.¹ For him all authentic art functions as 'the letting happen of the advent of truth of what is', the advent of 'something light, free and open'.² Images, metaphors that occur through his writing are earth, paths through the woods, home, hut, mountains, sky, brook, light, Open, Nature, with poets and thinkers having been on the same path through the woods. Poetry was 'the inaugural naming of the gods of the essence of things'. It was not 'merely an ornament accompanying existence, not merely a temporary enthusiasm, or nothing but an interest and amusement'.³ For him the poet as a person disappears: 'the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a

passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge'.⁴ The poet 'must tell of what has to be written of', must be 'poetically on' the track of that which needs to be said.⁵

Heidegger was influenced by a variety of thinkers, such as Karl Barth, Spengler, St Paul, Pascal, Kierkegaard and Thomas à Kempis. He was concerned with 'openness', the 'openness of *licht* as lightness, free and open, thus the lightening of a burden, the basis of brightness and radiance.' Man's essence was 'composed of a state of being "outside of oneself," an ex-ploding "towards."⁶

In these troubled dark times we live in, in which Mother Earth is threatened by the destructive nature of human beings, it is necessary that the artist, and all humanity, embrace, and live in harmony with the laws of nature. 'Primitive' people were in touch with the rhythms of nature, so, now, artists, and all people, need to regain that sense of life. The artist-magician had to enter into a ritualistic trance during which he then evoked the supernatural powers which identified him with the bison, mammoth, horse or deer, until he was possessed by the soul of the animal itself and could then portray its image in the wall of his cave.⁷ It is this spirit that is now needed, if artists are to lead people back to the balance we need if humanity is to finally live in harmony with the earth.

What is needed in art in Australia and elsewhere, is 'a slow, lonely and often anonymous return to a mythic space where the inner and outer worlds mirror each other.'⁸ Such a return is often done in patience and humility, in suffering by a few lonely individuals, a few isolated communities. To understand the present, and the future, it is necessary to go back, to look again at the past, so that it is fully understood, before an advance can begin. This is why so much contemporary art is so shallow, because too many artists are too arrogant to look closely at the past, to learn from it, so that they merely mimic the latest trend, or show, by their work, their indifference to the past. There is a need to go beyond passivity, specialisation, to a new unity, a wholeness, which transcends destructive forces with an art which is in harmony with the rhythm of Mother Earth.

What is needed in art for it to be fully resolved is what Anton Ehrenzweig calls the hidden order where the artist resolves the tensions inherent in making a work and, in doing so, attains the 'oceanic' level where individual existence is lost in mystic union with the universe.⁹ The artist, to achieve a new synthesis, has to surrender to his or her drives, embracing maniac bliss to overcome fragmentation and achieve depth,

coherence. In J Westland Marston's novel in verse, the poet Gerald Level aims to transcend time through art:

A Statue's silence - is the Sculptor's Voice
The Painter's immortality resides
In his own forms, and objects ...
So that
 ... the Sons
of Genius have prerogative to stand
Exempt from Time's decree; Immutable
In change!¹⁰

Aesthetically the artist should aim to evoke in the viewer the giddiness that overcomes Marcel Proust's Bergotte, who sees a little patch of yellow in Vermeer's *Street in Delft*, in the sensation Proust vividly describes looking at his hawthorns.¹¹

The creative synthesis that is necessary for the artist to achieve psychic integration, wholeness, a perfect balance of male and female, is found in the work of Amanda Hart. She uses a variety of materials, from felt, seagrass matting, hessian, paper, wood and computer developed fractals inspired by the Mandelbrot set in fractal geometry, to create mandalas. What is fascinating about her work is how she uses new forms to embody age old wisdoms.

The life of Joseph Beuys is noteworthy here. The people who had contributed something to life, Beuys believed, had suffered. Out of suffering something higher emerged. Beuys was influenced by Christ, especially his Sermon on the Mount. Christ represented for Beuys the healing principle.

Beuys's life was filled with guilt and anguish about the future of the world. Fluxus, which he had connections with, aimed to bring together musicians, dancers, poets, sculptors and all type of musicians together, releasing the individual from any form of repression. Art was global and the world whole, with his art bringing out situations which both created and destroyed, not always creating pleasant effects. Beuys refused to adopt the image of the artist as an antisocial and marginal genius, constantly locked in his studio. On the other hand, he was determined not to become integrated with groups, organisations or movements. He was concerned with the journey, exploring aspects of human expression yet to be taped. His work dealt with energy, and regeneration, healing, bringing together the individual and the community and bringing forth an atmosphere of human warmth based on cooperation and fraternity. Beuys was concerned with the

duty of the thinking man, the 'active pain of doing', 'the passive pain of suffering.'

He had an affinity with the French artist Yves Klein, who wrote, in his journal in 1957, that

the painter must paint a single masterpiece: himself, unceasingly; and thus he must become a kind of atomic generator, a kind of generator with a constant output of energy, filling the atmosphere with a constant output of energy, filling the atmosphere with his whole artistic presence, which remains in his room though he leave it. This is painting, the true painting of the twentieth century...¹²

Klein believed that 'in the realm of the blue air more than anywhere else one feels that the world is accessible to the most unlimited reverie. It is then', he stated, 'that a reverie assumes true depth.' He thought that there was 'an imaginary beyond, a beyond pure and insubstantial... the dwelling place of Bachelard's beautiful phrase: "First there is nothing, next there is a depth of nothingness then a profundity of blue".'¹³ Born in 1928, Klein died in 1962 of a heart attack. In seven years he produced over one thousand works. He believed that art should result in experiences rather than objects. The Rosicrucian Society that he was affiliated with equated spirit with spaces and space with colour, particularly the colour blue. Klein wanted all men to centre into a great new world-wide civilisation of the beautiful.¹⁴ Like van Gogh, he longed 'to be free from I know not what horrible cage!'¹⁵ He liked jazz.

Too much art now has become mere gesture, playfulness, appropriation, with often a presence of narcissism, with little sense of the beauty found in classical art. What is needed is a new seriousness, a return to more ethical, eternal values, a disavowal of the notion of time as progress, but an awareness of the values of tradition, and an attempt to regain these skills and values, from a sense of sacredness, a sacredness not necessarily based on religion, but a belief that what man or woman creates, has to be solid, to have any value. What is needed in art is the sense of a higher vocation in which the patient suppression of the self is the only road to eventual artistic realisation, with art an exalted, redemptive calling, being, as in James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist*, 'pure, sacred flight', with the artist 'forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being'.¹⁶ In Australia there is an awareness of sacred traditions in Aboriginal art, with the shamanic influence notable in the work of such artists as Rover Thomas, Judy Watson

and Arone Meeks. This explains how popular Aboriginal art is, the fact that it speaks from old traditions.

In India there has been a different idea of beauty to the confused notions so prevalent in our society, with 'all the forces of life... grouped like a forest, whose thousand waving arms are led by Nataraja, the Master of the Dance. Everything has its place, every being has its function, and all take place in the divine concert, their different voices, and their very dissonances, creating, in the phrase of Heraclitus, a most beautiful harmony.'¹⁷ As Rabindranath Tagore sang:

Not my way of salvation, to surrender the world!
Rather for me the taste of Infinite Freedom
While yet I am bound by a thousand bonds to the wheel...

In each glory of sound and sight and scent
I shall find Thy infinite joy abiding:
My passion shall burn as the flame of salvation,
The flower of my love shall become the ripe fruit of devotion.¹⁸

In India, philosophy is the key to the map of life. In the Brahman view of life, the 'outward movement' - 'Evolution, the Path of Pursuit - the Pravritti Marga - is characterized by self-assertion.'¹⁹ The outward path is the Religion of Time. The religion of those who return, as Proust and Joyce did in their great novels, is the Religion of Eternity. The great men (Coomaraswamy, writing in the 1920s, does not say women) - the heroes, saviours, saints, and avatars - are those who have passed 'the period of greatest stress and have attained peace, or at least have attained to occasional and unmistakable vision of life as a whole.'²⁰ They are 'the "Profilic" of Blake, the "Masters" of Nietzsche, the true Brahmans in their own right, partaking 'of the nature of the Superman and the Bodhisattva', their activity 'determined by their love and wisdom, and not by rules.' An activity is useful because it 'conduces to the attainment of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* (function, prosperity, pleasure and spiritual freedom), or any one or more of these, without detriment to any other.'²¹

In Australia, such a commitment is rare. The excessive materialism, slackness and hedonism in the Australian psyche means that the artist of supreme integrity is rare. Only Ian Fairweather and the theosophist Godfrey Miller came near the struggle, conflict and realisation found in Cézanne's art. Fittingly, that great Australian writer Patrick White covered his bedroom wall at his property in Dogwoods at Castle Hill with Fairweather's painting 'Gethsemane'. Here, a few days before Christmas 1951, White

slipped in the mud and faith began to come to him.²² He began to write again, taking up the manuscript of what he had called *A Life Sentence on Earth* and which became *The Tree of Man*.²³

Cézanne, in his struggle to get things right, did nothing in his last thirty years but work, working 'in a constant rage' to achieve 'la réalisation'.²⁴ 'Old, sick, exhausted every evening to the point of collapse', 'angry, mistrustful, ridiculed... mocked and mistreated'²⁵, he pushed on to achieve the pinnacle of success. He wanted to make 'things; not plastic, written things, but realities that arise from the craft itself.'²⁶ Like van Gogh, Cézanne 'was an event most people no longer had the patience to experience...' Like Rodin, he was engaged on something so large, no one could deal with it. 'Sick, old and isolated', he was seized by a rage with how his old city was being 'destroyed and disfigured every day.'²⁷ He was not concerned with being original, but wanted to discover 'the inexhaustible nature within'.²⁸ Rilke, in his study on Cézanne, celebrated his virtues. While, in his last years, Cézanne was old and shabby, inside he was 'marvellously beautiful'.²⁹ Rilke admired Cézanne as 'the old man who somehow walked far ahead, alone, followed only by children who threw stones...'³⁰ He wanted 'to comprehend everything...' to 'reduce immensity to the action of our heart...'³¹ Rilke believed in things, in the things of the word. God was in all things, God was the 'thing of things'.³²

Art, at the end of the twentieth century, can still speak profoundly to us. If made with great care and insight and immense vision, it can force us to face up to and address the reality of our time, drawing us in to respect realities much greater than us. In doing so, it can result in us having a great respect for, and love of, Mother Earth in all its complexity. In such a way, it can help us move through a dangerous time in human history.

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⁷ Germain Bazin, *A History of Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, Bonanza Books, 1959, p.1.

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¹⁴ Yves Klein 1928-1962, *Selected Writings*, The Tate Gallery, London, 1974, p.39.

¹⁵ Yves Klein, extract from a lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959, Yves Klein catalogue, Gimpel Fils, 30 Davies Street, London, Library, Australian National Gallery.

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²⁴ Clara Rilke (ed.), *Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters on Cézanne*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1988, p.34.

²⁵ Ibid., p.5.

²⁶ Ibid., p.35.

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²⁸ Ibid., p.47.

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