

No place like home: Australian art history and contemporary art at the start of the 1970s

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This essay considers an emergent Australian art history's dramatically changing impact on art criticism in the late 1960s and, in turn, as a key part of a wider perspective on the intersection of contemporary art and art history in Australia from the early 1960s into the 1980s. The change in Australian art history was evident in the development of modes of professional competence modelled on formalism and a tendentious neo-Marxism in transition towards an affectless postmodernism, already strands in international art history as a discipline. So, during the period, seminal Australian art historian Bernard Smith's battle against what he saw as American cultural imperialism was well and truly lost. Young art historians writing on contemporary art from the late 1960s on, including art historians Patrick McCaughey and Terry Smith, were convinced that the centre of world art was now New York. This idea of world art did not, however, diminish the Australian preoccupation with nation, national identity and the position—and therefore the category—of Australian art. Rather, it was to result in key writings, from Terry Smith's articles to Paul Taylor's postmodern polemics in *Art and Text*, all of which above all sought to locate Australian art in relation to international (which largely remained American) art. Here, we shall focus on the turn from the 1960s into the 1970s.

It has been our belief, since Green wrote the conclusion of his earlier book, *Peripheral Vision*, in 1995, that art in art made in Australia is badly explained through the lens of an area study delimited by nation.¹ We agree thus with the more sweeping work of our friend and colleague Rex Butler, and argue that this is definitely the case with art made since the later 1960s, art that, following Terry Smith, we will call contemporary art.² But the energy of Australian art historians—and in the oblivious art historian's more significant and even more energetic alter ego, the curator—in constructing a so-called national story and then in reifying this through a compartmentalization between national and international studies and exhibitions, and between the province and the centre, has resulted in a divide. In this, the politics of the Cold War played, we think, an interesting but significantly understudied role.

At the end of the 1960s, writing on Australian art—usually art criticism and this in turn usually means art reviewing, even though that genre's judgements have the least longevity—remained resolutely even if understandably driven by local histories and reputations. With the embattled exception of Donald Brook and the

¹ See Charles Green, *Peripheral Vision: Contemporary Australian Art 1970-94*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 1995.

² See Rex Butler, 'A Short History of UnAustralian Art', *Broadsheet*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2003; Rex Butler (ed.), *Radical Revisionism: Writings on Australian Art 1788-2005*, Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2005; see Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009.

young Terry Smith at the Power Institute, Australian art historians working at the two, growing, art history departments at the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney's Power Institute, had little or no interest in international contemporary art. A mere couple of art publications that included the longstanding glossy magazine *Art and Australia*, and local networks and art collectives, including the Contemporary Art Society and Central Street Gallery, were almost exclusively devoted to local art. Art criticism meant reviewing: though there were at least four art critics writing regularly for daily or weekly newspapers in Sydney, and the same number in Melbourne, this writing was essentially ephemeral, based on the assessment of the wide spectrum of, again exclusively local, art exhibitions. It was, essentially, a form of reportage. As we shall see, Terry Smith's determination to write about contemporary art, not through the methodology of art reviewing, but as a form of art history, with all the elongated perspective that this implies, was exceptional.

However, probably no more than a couple of art historians or critics sought to enter that world of international art; the rest remained resolutely focused upon their local context. These are the two parallel economies of Australian art that persist to this day: on the one hand the art of biennales; and on the other the art of both auction rooms and departments of Australian art in state art museums.

In another essay we are taking up the task of describing Patrick McCaughey's cosmopolitanism, spurred by his reaction to the 1967 exhibition, *Two Decades of American Painting*, and manifest in his promotion of the 1968 exhibition, *The Field*. Elsewhere we have looked at the parallel but very different project of Donald Brook at exactly this same time.³ Here, however, we will look at three early years in Sydney, at Terry Smith's first attempt to argue that a group of artists working in Australia had made a contribution to international rather than Australian art. Terry Smith's writing in the years between 1969 and 1972 grappled with a significant shift in Australian art's aspirations to international visibility, a shift not quite the same as wider changes in art during the same period. His views changed during the period. They evolved in tandem with the rapidly changing art he wrote about.

Smith, like Patrick McCaughey, was educated in an exclusively European discipline of art history by scholars Joseph Burke, Franz Phillip and Bernard Smith, graduating in Fine Arts from the University of Melbourne. But Terry Smith was very different from Patrick McCaughey. In an increasingly politicised atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of international art was gradually entangled with highly charged issues such as the Vietnam War. Out of this emerged a hugely significant point of difference between Patrick McCaughey and Terry Smith. When McCaughey became replacement art critic at *The Age* in 1966, he was already married. By the time he was appointed permanent art critic at *The Age* in 1967, he was a family man with two young children.⁴ McCaughey, like Donald Brook, sought

³ See Heather Barker and Charles Green, 'Flight from the Object: Donald Brook, Inhibodress and the Emergence of Post-Studio Art in Early 1970s Sydney' *E-MAJ*, no. 3, Dec. 2009; the present authors are currently preparing a book on the historiography of Australian contemporary art, *No Place Like Home: Writing about Australian Contemporary Art, 1960-1988*, from which this essay is drawn.

⁴ 'My father married us in the little weatherboard Presbyterian church in Violet Town at the end of January 1966 We had our two children in quick succession. We were both in our early twenties.'

to keep art and politics separate. In 2003 he recalled, 'We were the last aesthetes, the last indulged, before the sterner activists of the 1968 student riots or the brave protesters of the war in Vietnam.'⁵ Terry Smith, however, with far more activist views, was faced with a terrible dilemma. He had to reconcile his fascination with New York's place as a locus of advanced art with his political views, which were completely opposed to American capitalism and imperialism. As a third year student, Terry Smith organised a successful petition calling for lecturer Bernard Smith to expand his Modern Art course to include relatively more recent artists such as Jackson Pollock.⁶ Terry Smith moved to Sydney from Melbourne in 1968, and became, at Bernard Smith's invitation, a tutor at the Power Institute, at Sydney University's new art history department. With part of the income from the Power Bequest, Bernard Smith had commissioned Bernard Karpel, Chief Librarian of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to assemble a substantial departmental library for the Power Institute that included a significant number of books on modern and contemporary art; this library was to be very important to Terry Smith and his other young colleagues. The connection with Bernard Smith (no relation) was to be longstanding even if the two held very different views. Terry Smith worked with Bernard Smith, David Saunders, Donald Brook and Elwyn Lynn, in the thick of the art critical and administrative battles that were going on between Brook and Bernard Smith. As we have described elsewhere, Brook thought that art critics had failed to keep abreast with new developments in contemporary art, especially post-object art. He was fiercely opposed to Bernard Smith's art history curriculum, especially his reluctance to introduce practical art classes, and to the Power Institute's acquisitions policy (Elwyn Lynn's responsibility). As Brook worked on his self-appointed task of developing a philosophical theory of contemporary art, young artists were working through their own ideas about the future directions of Australian art. Terry Smith was friendly with many of these, including influential painter Tony McGillick, a leader in the establishment of the Central Street Gallery in 1966.⁷ McGillick had lived and worked in London and was well aware of the difficulties of expatriation faced by Australian artists who wanted to be successful overseas. Yet he and other artists of this generation—Michael Johnson, Dick Watkins, Wendy Paramor, Günter Christmann and Alan Oldfield—shared little of the nationalist sensitivities of the previous generation—artists like Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman, John Brack, John Olsen and John Perceval and writers such as Bernard Smith, Alan McCulloch, Laurie

Patrick McCaughey, *The Bright Shapes and the True Names: A Memoir*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003, 70.

⁵ McCaughey, *The Bright Shapes and the True Names*, 42.

⁶ For an account of this incident see Terry Smith, 'Preface', in John Spencer and Peter Wright (eds.), *The Writings of Bernard Smith: Bibliography 1938–1998*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2000, 1–2, 1.

⁷ John White and Harold Noritis were by day commercial artists who ran their business from the Central Street premises. When they moved out of the building, they retained the lease and made the space available for use as a gallery. The Central Street Gallery was established to show the work of artists who had almost all returned from England in 1965–66. It was initially run as an artists' cooperative. The first manager was Royston Harpur, a painter and former gallery director at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Central Street used its catalogues, publications and seminars to argue for the significance of the art that they featured. For a fuller account of the Central Street Gallery see Paul McGillick, 'The Institute of Contemporary Art, Central Street Gallery', *Art Network*, no. 6, Winter 1982, 48–9.

Thomas and artist/writer Elwyn Lynn. They were both beset by and welcoming of the Cold War realities of the internationalist present.

This 1960s generation had turned away from the established narrative of Australian cultural identity. Paradoxically, the Antipodean icons of this narrative — Nolan and Boyd — had become relatively successful in the U.K. and were now part of the British art establishment. Even so, they were known as semi-unwitting producers of exotic art, as living proof of the power of a metropolitan centre (even one as provincial as London) to absorb and tame provincial radicals. For younger artists, the iconography of Nolan and the Antipodeans represented a dated and irrelevant model that misrepresented the present and, worse, branded Australian art as that of an exotic backwater. Terry Smith, writing in 2002, even located that atavism in the Sydney-based adaptations of Abstract Expressionism and, more often, of Tachism (Olsen, Rapotec, Helsing, Rose, Saulkauskas and others), recalling that, 'for many artists and writers of my generation, Australian abstract painting of the 1950s and early 1960s embodied all that was most embarrassing about local art'⁸ Smith began 'Color-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–70' by comparing a Tony McGillick shaped-canvas abstraction to a brushy Stan Rapotec painting that was essentially a landscape. Smith's main complaint then about Australian Abstract Expressionism was that it was descriptive, having its source in European (and Spanish) rather than American, painterly abstraction.⁹ He had imported his objections to Australian Abstract Expressionism from Donald Brook, under whose influence he saw its purported expressionism as a logically impossible aspiration because, in philosophical terms, it was asking the audience to understand the visual equivalent of a private language, even though philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a key influence of Brook and, pretty much, a whole generation of 1960s art theorists and minimalist artists had convinced him that this was impossible. By contrast, the Color-Form artists, about whom Smith was about to write, had trimmed back the signs of personality as much as they could, offering, at least in principle, a determinedly public visual language. This was a fairly crude, productivist judgement, but one typical of international art criticism of the period.

This was a shift in allegiance from English and European humanism (an allegiance represented by Bernard Smith and the Antipodeans) and from obeisance to the American centre (represented locally by Patrick McCaughey) towards the evolving notion of a cosmopolitan international style that disdained regional markers of any kind. For by the end of the 1960s, Terry Smith was increasingly dissatisfied with formalist art criticism, the model available to young critics from the two widely circulated art magazines of the period, *Artforum* and *Studio International*. Thus, he believed that Australian artists had developed a style of painting (his American-spelt term was 'Color-Form,' indicating its formalist genealogy) that could gain recognition of their art as international rather than regional. The aim was to achieve recognition of specific examples of Australian art as a new contribution to art

⁸ Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art. Volume Two: The Twentieth Century – Modernism and Aboriginality*, St Leonards: Craftsman House, 2002, 16.

⁹ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–1970', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 1, June-July 1970, 6–17, 6.

rather than as the wrong end of cultural transfer or artistic diffusion, and not as exemplary regional outposts of exotic art.

Whether to look at Australian art or to America was only one aspect of geography that was becoming more and more affected by political division, by the increasing awareness of the injustices perpetrated by both sides at the height of the Cold War and the tarnished image of America as the defender of world democracy. The fate of the idea of the 'Digger' as the iconic image of the nation illustrated both the way in which war, always foundational to Australian identity, was now complicated by the Cold War and by the American military alliance in Vietnam. If wartime events such as the Fall of Singapore had communicated the sense that Australia and Australian troops were dispensable to Britain, so Alan Seymour's play, *The One Day of the Year* (1962), now exposed the dark side of the aging Digger at home and the Anti-Vietnam War movement of the late 1960s projected an awareness that young Australian conscripts were pawns in an imperialist American war. Demonstrators and students took to the streets and crowded the universities of Sydney and Melbourne in the late 1960s as they did all over the world.

In this context, Terry Smith's 'The Style of the 'Sixties'' (*Quadrant*, 1969) criticised Clement Greenberg's recent Power Lecture (1968) for its 'pontifical tone', its evasion of the fact that 'a private language is in operation', its assertion of ostensibly verifiable cyclic shifts, and its 'attempt to provide objective justifications for judgements made on the basis of taste', and was an attack freighted by an identification of the American art establishment with that nation's imperialism and neo-colonialism.¹⁰ Terry Smith thought that Greenberg's authoritarian criticism failed to cope with contemporary art, with Greenberg's and Fried's ('one of Mr Greenberg's most brilliant and extreme followers') designation of Pop Art, Happenings, Minimal Art, kinetic art, assembled and ephemeral art as 'non-authentic.'¹¹

His important essay, 'Color-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–1970', was the lead article in the first issue of *Other Voices* (June/July 1970), a new journal of art criticism edited by Terry Smith and Paul McGillick. *Other Voices* was founded to offer an alternative to *Art and Australia*, the only Australian art magazine professionally and continuously published at the time. But the coffee-table-friendly glossy, *Art and Australia*, did not provide any real forum for the kind of text-heavy features that interested Terry Smith and his associates. As a result, 'a group of us established our own journal, *Other Voices*, to offer an alternative platform for serious writing about the newest art.'¹² Its square format deliberately recalled *Artforum*. The design was minimalist, the sans serif typeface was suitably industrial. Even now, the magazine feels contemporary.

The first issue of *Other Voices* was produced in Sydney in June 1970. Terry Smith and Paul McGillick were the editors, although Smith recalled in 2005 that 'Paul McGillick had strength in experimental theatre and music but less in the visual arts' so 'the key decisions about the magazine were taken by myself and Tony

¹⁰ Terry Smith 'The Style of the 'Sixties'', *Quadrant*, vol. 14, no. 2, March–April 1969, 49–53. American critic Clement Greenberg presented 'Avant-garde Attitudes', the inaugural John Power Lecture in Contemporary Art, at the Power Institute, University of Sydney, on 17 May 1968.

¹¹ Terry Smith, 'The Style of the 'Sixties'', 51.

¹² Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art. The Twentieth Century—Modernism and Aboriginality*, 17.

McGillick.¹³ The name of the magazine was Paul McGillick's inspiration, borrowed from the title of a Truman Capote short story. There was a panel of contributing editors from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth amongst which were familiar names: Donald Brook, G.R. Lansell, Jackson Hibberd, Robin Wallace-Crabbe, and Geoff Shaw. *Other Voices*' sub-title, 'A Critical Journal', set the magazine's agenda: '*Other Voices* is a critical journal concerned with seeking an informed and discriminating assessment of contemporary Australian art.¹⁴ This marked out the territory, especially in relation to *Art and Australia*. In its pages readers would find critical analysis of new and good Australian art written by experts, as judged by the editors of *Other Voices*. But as well:

The magazine is oriented towards painting and sculpture and the teaching of these subjects at the secondary and tertiary level. However the editors feel that painting and sculpture cannot be adequately appreciated in isolation from the concerns and directions of theatre, music, literature, film, dance, architecture and television in Australia, and therefore, wherever possible and appropriate, in-depth articles on those areas will be available in the magazine.¹⁵

This would have considerably broadened the magazine's coverage. It brought in all the arts, high and low, and it set itself a role in art education by incorporating the magazines of the Art Teachers' Associations of NSW and South Australia. Terry Smith recalled,

I sought to make it a national magazine by bringing in reps from each capital city, which worked, and it turned out that most of them were active in art teaching, including secondary education art education (another interest of all of us), so we brokered the magazine as the representative journal of each state's secondary art teaching magazine.¹⁶

The first issue followed through on this with articles on painting, music and art education; an interview with Anthony Burgess; four pages of drawings; and various reviews. However, for all its grand aims, the editorial was weakened by its vagueness and qualifications. It projected a surprising degree of uncertainty. There was also a tacit admission that Australian art and art writing needed the importation of material from overseas, a deference reminiscent of Bernard Smith's respect for the 'deep fountains of European culture and civilization.'¹⁷ *Other Voices*' editors wrote, 'This magazine will also undertake to print articles from overseas journals and from its own overseas correspondents where such material might not otherwise be freely available to readers in Australia.'¹⁸ This was qualified immediately: '*Other Voices* is however an Australian magazine devoted primarily to the discussion of Australian

¹³ Terry Smith, email letter to the authors, 18 August 2005.

¹⁴ Untitled editorial statement, *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 1, June-July 1970, 3.

¹⁵ Untitled editorial statement, *Other Voices*, 3.

¹⁶ Terry Smith, email letter to the authors, 18 August 2005.

¹⁷ Bernard Smith, 'Introduction', *Australian Painting*, ix.

¹⁸ Untitled editorial statement, 3.

art by Australian critics. Here the editors feel that the magazine has a particular responsibility in promoting an informed and lively critical dialogue by offering a regular forum for such discussion.¹⁹ These paragraphs really summarised all that was familiar about *Other Voices*: the assertion of the magazine's Australianness modified by the ubiquitous provincialism problem, echoing the supportive, liberal-humanism associated with Bernard Smith and literary writers associated with *Meanjin's* project of building a strong national culture. *Other Voices'* editors continued:

Any artistic activity requires virile and intensive dialogue if it is to remain healthy, and continue to make a contribution to its culture. This magazine is intended to be the vehicle for such a dialogue. Editorially therefore, it is strictly non-partisan: its only commitment is to the contemporary and to the reassessment of the past in terms of the contemporary.²⁰

The commitment to the contemporary, though, implied exclusion and omission. Though the editors claimed the magazine was 'strictly non-partisan', its readers would not have found articles by most well known Australian art writers of the time such as Elwyn Lynn, Alan McCulloch, Daniel Thomas, James Gleeson, Laurie Thomas, Bernard Smith, not even Patrick McCaughey. The editors were looking for 'dialogue' that was 'informed' and 'contemporary' but established art writers would not qualify, for those that did write about contemporary art were dismissive or ignorant. Some still thought that it was not art at all (though of the list just mentioned, the young Daniel Thomas certainly did not fit that bill, and he had been crucial in shepherding important exhibitions such as *Two Decades of American Painting* to Sydney.)

It is probably not an exaggeration to call this a 'manifesto'. Many magazines founded in the 1970s began with similarly grand statements of their aims and beliefs.²¹ Most of them didn't last beyond two or three issues. As in the case of *Other Voices*, the seeds of failure could be seen in initial editorials, in aims so loaded that, despite declaring themselves non-partisan, magazines set very serious limits on potential contributors and therefore on their potential readers. *Other Voices'* connection with art teachers' associations probably seemed like a good idea because it provided a guaranteed readership of a known size, giving the magazine a level of reliable funding and readership. Unfortunately, the two parts of the magazine were not very compatible. Nearly half the magazine was devoted to Teachers Association news of no interest to readers who were attracted by the art criticism at the front of the magazine. The Association readers may have been open to the art and this may

¹⁹ Untitled editorial statement, 3.

²⁰ Untitled editorial statement, 3.

²¹ For a discussion of the manifesto as a genre see Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. Lyon develops a theory of the manifesto based on a long definition that begins with 'a manifesto is understood as the testimony of a historical present tense spoken in the impassioned voice of its participants' (9); Lyon also makes the important point that the manifesto's 'rigid hierarchical binaries' deploy a 'rhetoric of exclusivity'(3). This is particularly apt of the world of Australian art magazines of the 1970s.

have been an excellent means by which they expanded their education in its theory. It is more likely, however, that they did not want anything beyond the Association's section.

Smith's 'Color-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–1970' remains a key to the historiography of the period and also amongst the first instances of art history written on contemporary art in Australia. Smith's argument was that Sydney painting made between the years 1966 to 1970 by artists associated with the Central Street Gallery constituted an innovation that he called 'Color-Form Painting.' Further, he proposed that the Central Street Gallery group constituted an Australian avant-garde. The artists he mentioned by name were Tony McGillick, Rollin Schlicht, Royston Harpur, Gunter Christmann, Dick Watkins and Joe Szabo. He omitted the artists of the Pinacotheca group in Melbourne, whose works were at least as timely and arguably, in the case of Robert Hunter's paintings on paper and ephemeral paintings made directly onto walls, Trevor Vickers' modular fibreglass resin polyptychs and Dale Hickey's translations of painting into ready-made installations, at least as relevant. The task remains of establishing all these artists—especially McGillick and Hunter—within an international canon of contemporary art history alongside the several important developments in painting outside New York or *Artforum's* purview, including the French Support-Surface group.

Terry Smith's argument was closely based in the specific narrative of the Sydney art world. He noted that a group of artists centred on the Central Street Gallery comprised young artists who had returned from formative overseas study—the role of art schools remains central in the narrative of contemporary art from the 1960s to the present—at the same time. All were committed to the exploration of colour in painting. They were united in their belief that they had the opportunity to 'lift Australian art to an international level in terms of both its quality and the intensity of its exploration'.²² By this he meant that they were different from the preceding generation because they were aware of 'the necessity of group activity' (this is quite different to previous generation's individualism but also predicted Smith's own attraction to conceptualist artist collaborations) and of 'their own position as artists working within a provincial situation'.²³ What he was saying was that these artists were consciously working as a group to develop innovations that would allow them to avoid the stigma and the fact of the 'provincial.' This would both be consistent with and would extend international contemporary art. Their badging by commonly developed attitudes and quasi-sculptural painterly methods constituted a recognisable, cohesive style. The group constituted an Australian avant-garde.

It is important to remember that Terry Smith was writing for a new journal of which he was a founding editor, the first significant new Australian art magazine since *Art and Australia* had begun in 1963. *Other Voices* was attempting to bring art from 'the avant-garde edges' (as he was later to call it) to the attention of the Australian art establishment and to an audience that would already have been at least slightly familiar with the work he was discussing. This was not reviewing but

²² Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 8.

²³ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 8.

an exercise in historiography. In other words, this was already a revisionist project, one written with the revision of art history in mind and therefore written not in the style of an art critic but with the scholarship—footnotes and all—of an art historian. He had to convince the converted reader. He began by declaring that terms such as ‘hard-edge’, ‘colour-field’, ‘minimal’ and ‘new abstraction’ had been developed in American art criticism but were ‘insufficiently encompassing’ for the discussion of the local painting he was to be talking about. He next proposed a new term, ‘Color-Form Painting’ which was clearly derived from and sought to extend Greenberg’s term, ‘Color-Field Painting.’ He pointed out that Australian Abstract Expressionism—Olsen, Rapotec, Hensing, Upward—had its source in European, rather than American, painterly abstraction, and quoted Greenberg’s ‘Avant-Garde Attitudes’ to distinguish between ‘canons of style’ of the Ab-Ex 1950s and Color-Field 1960s in order to locate his ‘Color-Form’ term correctly. So, the first stage of his argument established the inadequacy of American critical terminology for the local painting that he proposed to call ‘Color-Form Painting’—and Smith self-consciously adopted the American spelling of ‘color’ for his new term. He was setting out a ‘canon’ of style in relation to Clement Greenberg’s American descriptions of a 1950s and 1960s canon. Now, the concept of a canon was here derived from the literary critical method of English critic, F.R. Leavis.²⁴ Applying art historical rather than art critical methodology, Smith went on to identify three chronological stages in the development of the new innovation. This, in itself, would have been quite impressive in a period of less than ten years. He then linked the development of this new art to ‘a social theory about the mechanics of change in a provincial art situation’, the theory of cultural transfer and reciprocal influence developed by ‘Professor Bernard Smith.’²⁵ Terry Smith, like Patrick McCaughey in ‘The Art Critic’ (1967) and, later, Paul Foss in ‘Theatrum Nondum Cognitorum’ (1981), may have disagreed with Bernard Smith about contemporary art but did not include him in his blanket condemnations of existing Australian art criticism.²⁶ Terry Smith was driven to appropriate the work of his predecessor and mentor. This continuity should be noted.

Terry Smith identified the first phases in the stylistic development of Color-Form Painting as an eclectic search carried out through 1966 for a collective identity. The kind of painting that came to be associated with the Central Street Gallery by the beginning of 1967 was, he suggested, the conjunction of three elements:

The work of American painters such as Stella and Noland; European geometric abstraction, especially in its American manifestation in the work of Albers, Kelly and others; and the art of Matisse.²⁷

²⁴ F.R. Leavis (1895–1978) was one of the most influential literary critics of the twentieth century. He combined close textual analysis with a commitment to moral seriousness and provided a carefully constructed canon of what he considered was ‘worthwhile’ English literature. Leavis was a fellow at Downing College, Cambridge from 1936 to 1962 and editor and cofounder of the influential quarterly *Scrutiny* from 1932 until its demise in 1953.

²⁵ Terry Smith, ‘Color-Form Painting’, 8.

²⁶ See Paul Foss, ‘Theatrum Nondum Cognitorum’ in Peter Botsman, Chris Burns and Peter Hutchings (eds.), *The Foreign Bodies Papers*, Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1981, 15–38.

²⁷ Terry Smith, ‘Color-Form Painting’, 10.

Essentially, he was arguing that the cross-continental synthesis of the three influences in the painting of the Central Street artists resulted in a 'new' style of painting that he chose to label 'Color-Form' painting. A form of this argument was to be used by Paul Taylor in his catalogue essay for the 'Popism' exhibition in 1982, constituting Australian Appropriation as a unique innovation based on geographical opportunism.²⁸

The second phase of the development of Color-Form painting was located in 1967–68, as the group identified a set of shared attitudes about painting. Terry Smith argued that the artists 'actively *sought* a style' that manifested these attitudes [Smith's emphasis].²⁹ The attitudes about painting they identified included: the belief that a painting was sufficient in itself and largely a matter of problem-solving; the tendency to paint in series; the emphasis of colour above all other formal factors in a painting; the preponderance of symmetrical and rectangular forms. It is in this phase that Terry Smith located what he called a 'characteristic failure.' He wrote that: 'the colours chosen are not only invariably *artificial* (that is, in no way environmental but based in an often superficial knowledge of colour theory) but also *close in value*' [his emphasis; the jargon is very much that of the formalist 1960s and is little used by painters today].³⁰ That is, in the very process of his definition of a style called Color-Form, Terry Smith was saying that the artists who he claimed created this style could not successfully manipulate its core component (colour), and that their paintings were flawed as a result. This was an important historiographical distinction.

The third phase in the development of Color-Form painting was, he said, 'its mature, open stage' during which the Central Street group began to break up.³¹ As with any group, collective identity became less important as its members developed an individual trajectory. Central Street Gallery ceased to be an artists' cooperative and became a commercial gallery. Tony McGillick was to write a letter correcting Terry Smith on points of fact and nuances of interpretation in the magazine's second issue: he sought to correct Smith's portrait of the group as a collective, asserting that from the start it had been a commercial gallery with two directors, White and Noritis.³² This is of minor importance beyond indicating that McGillick was uncomfortable with Smith's construction of himself as effective spokesperson and exclusive interpreter of the group and, effectively, with the weight of art history being placed on his and his friends' shoulders, as putatively the nation's first genuine avant-garde. As well, and at about the same time, Central Street's equivalent in Melbourne, Pinacotheca, was also being characterised as a collective. It was for a

²⁸ Paul Taylor, 'Popism', *Popism*, exh. cat., Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1982, 1; see especially Paul Taylor, 'Popism: The Art of White Aborigines', reprinted in Rex Butler (ed.), *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Critical Writings on Australian Art in the '80s and 90s*, Brisbane: IMA Publications, 1996, 85-7. The essay was commissioned for the international magazine, *Flash Art* and printed in *On the Beach*, no. 1, 1982.

²⁹ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 14.

³⁰ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 13.

³¹ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 14.

³² Tony McGillick, letter to the editor, *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 2, Spring 1970, 2-3.

short period only, during 1973 while the director, Bruce Pollard, travelled overseas on a sabbatical, though Pollard flirted with artist meetings and the short-lived *Pinacotheca Magazine*. His close artist friends constituted a de facto committee, advising Pollard about artists and international visitors. Pollard, though, was too strong a character to ever submit to committee rules.

Color-Form painting had been generally well accepted by the art world, with the exception of older critics who had 'formed their taste on abstract or figurative expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s.'³³ The National Gallery of Victoria's inaugural exhibition at its new St Kilda Road premises, *The Field* (1968), was especially important because it now showed the Central Street group's work alongside that of other thus far unrelated Melbourne artists. It prompted comparison with the work of American and English peers such as Richard Smith in the U.K. and Kenneth Noland in the U.S.. It was clear, however, from these comparisons that the Central Street group was not necessarily producing paintings that were much different or even better than paintings produced by other artists. And as Smith said, they lost 'their sense of themselves as an avant-garde.'³⁴ He seems to have been arguing that the Central Street group had developed a distinctive method of painting, Color-Form painting, which then became critically successful enough to be accepted as a legitimate *style* of painting by local art museums and critics. The harshest cut of all, Terry Smith suggested, was Greenberg's declaration, made during his visit to Sydney in May–June 1968, that the 'style of the sixties' was in decline. Directions had changed, even for Greenberg. The article reads as though Terry Smith talked himself out of the idea—and out of the model of stylistic differentiation determining innovation—in the process of writing the argument and developing a self-consciously art-historical treatment of his material, but the historiographical self-consciousness of his gambit remains interesting, and can, with the risk of repetition, be reduced to this. Smith appears to follow the model that had been proposed by Bernard Smith in *Australian Painting 1788–1970*, in the second edition of his book, which is more or less this: young artists go overseas, discover new styles, return to Australia and introduce the new style locally, incurring the wrath and ridicule of the conservative art establishment.³⁵ In fact, Bernard Smith almost certainly borrowed

³³ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 14. Terry Smith didn't name the critics but we can be sure that he was referring to Laurie Thomas, Elwyn Lynn and Alan McCulloch, all of whom he did name in 'Changes in Art and Art Criticism' in November 1970.

³⁴ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 15.

³⁵ Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting, 1788–1970*, second edition, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971. Bernard Smith had written four new chapters for the second edition of *Australian Painting*, bringing it up to 1970. In this edition, as in subsequent editions, the first nine chapters remained unchanged except for the correction of errors. A new chapter, 'Chapter Ten, The Art Scene in the 1960s' began with a quote from Franz Philipp, 'There are two types of cultural provincialism: unawareness and over-awareness of the centre.' Bernard Smith's understanding of provincialism was that 'distance has caused a time-lag in the reception, absorption and florescence of styles generated in those distant metropolitan centres.' He made an important distinction between isolation and distance. His opinion was that Australia's provincial status was weak because metropolitan centres created their own dynamic. This was not dissimilar to the view of Donald Brook who wrote in 'New Art in Australia' (1972), 76-80 that Australian art could not be metropolitan art until Australian cities became international cultural centres with their own metropolitan powers of taste making. Terry Smith imported Bernard Smith's belief in the power of the time lag into 'Color-Form Painting' and then into

his description of the Central Street group as an avant-garde in that book's concluding chapter from Terry Smith's essay, which he had read and discussed with Terry Smith before its publication in *Other Voices*. So far we have a simple model of cultural transfer from centre to periphery. The difference with Terry Smith was that he understood that this new style, demanding the removal of subject, content and emotion, contained nothing that made it obviously either provincial or metropolitan. The Central Street Gallery artists saw the unique advantages of such a stripped down language, such an elimination of local signifiers, and 'they believed that their kind of painting had only to be shown and it would convert the Sydney art world.'³⁶ But the project failed to produce art that was internationally successful and was undermined rather than reinforced by the apparently indiscriminate proliferation *as style* of such art in 'The Field.' This was driven home by Greenberg's disappointing indifference to the work of the Central Street artists when he visited Sydney (the same was true in Melbourne). Terry Smith called Greenberg's response a 'pin-prick' but it must have been a disappointment for the ambitious Central Street artists, who Smith argued had developed a strategy that they hoped would enable them to break into the international art world. Not only that, but Greenberg's visit was the perfect opportunity for at least one of them to be 'picked up' and swept off to international art world stardom, as had been the lucky break for Canadian Jack Bush, or even for regional American artists such as Washington D.C.-based artists, painter Morris Louis or sculptor Anne Truitt, both of whose careers were transformed by visits from a younger Greenberg.³⁷

Terry Smith had done his best to talk the group up as an avant-garde but had ended up talking them down as canonical avant-garde artists. It should be remembered that Smith was an observer, not the group's spokesman, as Ian Milliss has reminded us, and one—though one of the most energetic—of several academics, curators and critics scouting amongst new artists. He combined national and international models of innovation to evaluate a small group of artists who produced what turned out to be, as Terry Smith himself awkwardly conceded, paintings that 'were often merely charming.' The artists' quest for recognition had failed. Observing this failure, combined with Terry Smith's later experience of the New

his landmark article, 'The Provincialism Problem' (1974). The time-lag notion was later argued against by Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen in a very sophisticated thesis in *The Necessity of Australian Art* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988). Bernard Smith did not retreat from his position, however, claiming in 'A Reply to my Critics' (*Art Monthly Australia*, no. 33, 1990, 3–6) that there was still a time lag in the reception of new ideas.

³⁶ Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting', 10.

³⁷ Clement Greenberg was in Australia from 16 May until 25 June 1968, visiting Brisbane, Perth, Canberra, Hobart, Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. His visit was sponsored by the Power Institute of Fine Arts and the Carnegie Corporation. He spoke on the Australian art scene at the Contemporary Art Society (NSW Branch) on 24 June. In this talk he commented only on the paintings of William Dobell, Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan, Sam Fullbrook, Clifton Pugh, Charles Blackman, Fred Williams, John Perceval and Arthur Boyd, saying that 'if we produced good art its Australian characteristics were of no importance'; see Elwyn Lynn, 'Clement Greenberg Sees Australia', *Art and Australia*, vol. 6, no. 2, September 1968, 150–52, 152. In this article, Lynn says of Greenberg and the Antipodeans, 'maybe he was exposed to them a little more' (150), drawing attention to the fact that Bernard Smith, Director of the Power Institute and author of *The Antipodean Manifesto*, was in a position to influence the extent of Clement Greenberg's travel plans and experience of Australian art in the time he was in Australia.

York art world, was to result in his landmark 1974 article, 'The Provincialism Problem', about which we have elsewhere written. The failure was in fact double. First, Smith had defined the contemporary failure of style itself: though his essay was obsessed with the need to precisely differentiate and describe one artist group's style from another (in light of succeeding generations' diminished interest in the importance of fine-grained discussions of style, his essay seems very much of its Greenbergian time), he had arrived through the logic of historical considerations at the conclusion that not only had this instance of stylistic innovation failed to succeed, but that stylistic evolution and innovation was in itself distant from the necessary condition for an avant-garde. Terry Smith had grounded his art history of Color-Form in Bernard Smith's idea that Australian art history was cyclical and bound by time lags. This in turn was conditioned by the paradigms of classical art history, and in particular the three-part, early to middle to late, nascence to maturity to decline narrative promulgated by Giorgio Vasari in *Lives of the Artists*, the mainstay of all Fine Arts Department courses and of the Western art history taught in Melbourne and Sydney. What were the models for such writing? Franz Phillip, who had taught him at the University of Melbourne, had pointed Smith toward Meyer Shapiro's famous essay on style, which had deeply marked his thinking. This in turn led to James Ackerman's essay on art in a book Ackerman had edited with Rhys Carpenter, *Art and Archaeology* (1963), where the argument that criticism is at the core of art historical practice is made.³⁸ He had Michael Fried's highly historicized, deeply self-conscious, late modernist polemic, *Three American Painters*, open alongside him as he wrote. Even though Terry Smith was consciously applying a century-spanning structure to a five-year period, the article resonates with his frustration with the contradiction between classical art history's methodology of achieved style and contemporary art theory's understanding that such conventionalised definitions of quality based on achieved style had overtaken the artists and, under the dominance of 1960s formalism's compressed theory of art history was doing so at an accelerated rate everywhere, not just to these artists. Second, he was to shortly see style itself as an obstacle to membership of the new, international avant-garde of the 1970s—the successors of Marcel Duchamp—searching out artists such as the nascent conceptualists in New York who sought to eliminate style and even aesthetic considerations altogether.

While he was living in New York in 1974, Terry Smith discussed *Other Voices* with John Coplans, editor of *Artforum*, and Max Kozloff, one of the magazine's leading writers. After their discussion Smith made these comments in his diary:

The old mistakes were aiming at a quality production, being too historicist, refusing all financial aid from 'corrupt' or/govt [sic] sources, total amateurism in the business side of it, having a fixed standard for 'quality' (inside my sensibility but incommunicable), not making sure the first six issues were

³⁸ James Ackerman and Rhys Carpenter (eds.), *Art and Archaeology*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963; he was also reading a small booklet, *Art Criticism in the 1960s*, in which Barbara Rose, Sidney Tillim, Max Kozloff and Fried debated art criticism; see Barbara Rose et al, *Art Criticism in the 1960s*, Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University, 1967.

guaranteed, underwritten, no matter what, narrowing focus, above all, not coming out regularly.³⁹

These mistakes were certainly not uniquely those of *Other Voices* but are well summed up by the term 'amateurism.' The editors had made two types of mistake: first, in the practical aspects of regularly producing a magazine; second, in determining the content of a magazine. Many short-lived art magazines in the 1970s were committed to a cause. In the case of *Other Voices*, the stated cause was to promote and document 'virile and intensive dialogue.' The editors felt that the magazine had to be free of 'corrupt' financial aid but they relied on sponsorship. Terry Smith recalled that 'the financing of the first two issues depended on support from a paint manufacturer, but the content got beyond his range of interests (Central Street painting), so that money dried up.'⁴⁰ Although the art teacher association demographic, with its size and reach, ensured a predictable circulation, it 'became too complicated to maintain' and was not sufficient to ensure the survival of the magazine.⁴¹ Terry Smith's 'fixed but incommunicable standard of quality' was inevitably based on his training as an art historian and despite his increasing commitment to a neo-Marxist perspective. Even though he criticised the historicism of Greenberg, he was unable to avoid it in his position as an editor as well as an author. The result was inevitable: the focus of material in *Other Voices* narrowed, limiting its appeal to readers. Most notable was the increasingly political content of the published articles. By political, we mean polemical and also partisan: *Other Voices* quickly adopted a definite critical position that was identifiable and exclusive. Even Terry Smith's 'Color-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–70' (*Other Voices* 1/1) and Donald Brook's 'Multiples and Unlimiteds' (*Other Voices* 1/2) were political essays about art. The second issue republished Denis Altman's 'Politics of Social Change', a paper delivered at the Socialist Scholars' Conference (Sydney University, 21–24 May 1970) and a positive commentary on this by Peter O'Brien.⁴² *Other Voices* 1/3 published a long article on political street theatre (including the 'Australian Performing Group Street Manifesto', an essay about Propaganda Art ('Making Art in London Today'), and Terry Smith's 'A Dearth in Venice: XXXV Biennale', a art discussion of the 1970 Venice Biennale oriented around the politics of the art world.⁴³ The fourth issue was

³⁹ Terry Smith, diary entry for 22 April 1974, private copy.

⁴⁰ Terry Smith, email letter to the authors, 18 August 2005. There was a full-page advertisement for Vynol artists' paints in *Other Voices* vol. 1, no. 1, June–July 1970, 45.

⁴¹ Terry Smith, email letter to the authors, 18 August 2005.

⁴² Denis Altman, 'Politics of Social Change', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 2, Spring 1970, 22–8; and Peter O'Brien, 'For the bourgeoisie the opposite of the formulae for the great is true. He who is not against is with me', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 2, Spring 1970, 29–30.

⁴³ See John Romeril and Graeme Blundel, 'Street Theatre: The Roots of Political Street Theatre', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 3, Summer 1970, 16–25 ('Australian Performing Group Street Manifesto', 25); Barry Hirst, 'Making Art in London Today', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 3, Summer 1970, 26–27; Terry Smith, 'A Dearth in Venice: XXXV Biennale', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 3, Summer 1970, 30–35; this article contains the following comment on Smith's disappointment in the American Pavilion because of the absence of work by recent artists: 'their absence in nearly every case was due to their refusal to be party to

to have featured artist pages by Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden and Roger Cutforth (all at that moment connected with the about-to-emerge collective Art & Language), 'The Economics of Art', a panel discussion of critics on art criticism, and Terry Smith on the political implications of new art.⁴⁴ But the issue never appeared. Smith won a Harkness Fellowship in early 1972 and no one took over *Other Voices* and its financial difficulties upon his departure for New York. It may have been that the Australian population was simply too small to ensure the viability of an Australian equivalent of *Artforum*. It may also have been that there were not enough Australian writers to sustain such a journal. But then years later *Art & Text* was to prove this wrong.

Our overall argument has also been that writing on art by scholars from the emergent discipline of Australian art history was significant in itself in contemporary art's innovations. No matter how ephemeral, time-bound or small in circulation that writing was, it is our Australian art history and deserves our full attention. But perhaps, we would argue, Australian art history also distorted the course of Australian art. The art historians' false consciousness of nation (which is to say that the idea of Australia was reified and phantasmic, dependent on circular definitions of self) remained central within Australian art history even as the apparent exception of cosmopolitan postmodernity began to emerge by the later 1970s. And this was deeply marked by Cold War neo-colonialism. Emergent generations of young art writers and art historians could not participate in the establishment of a sustainable and sustained discourse on contemporary art without participating, within the context of Cold War politics from Kennedy to Reagan, in a reification of the categories of 'Australian' in opposition to the idea of 'International' art, no matter how hard they tried. To sum up, Smith's pessimistic evaluation, even *before* his sojourn in New York, of the implications of provincial status marks the point at which Australian art history's interest begins to shift from the formulation of strategies to overcome the disadvantages of distance from a dominant centre to an understanding that, to the degree that artists were working with transcontinental issues such as feminism or postcolonialism or the understanding that art is always embedded within a geopolitical context, they were part of a broader international contemporary art, no matter how apparently local the signifiers. These shifts in emphasis were to be crucial because the autonomy of Australian art could then, and only then, be denied in a positive way.

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America's chauvinistic cultural imperialism, which they quite rightly see as inextricable bound up with its more obvious military and economic dominance of the world', 35.

⁴⁴ See *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 3, Summer 1970, 5.

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