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## THE PROVINCIALISM PROBLEM

Terry Smith

Provincialism appears primarily as an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values. It is not simply the product of a colonialist history; nor is it merely a function of geographic location. Most New York artists, critics, collectors, dealers, and gallery-goers are provincialist in their work, attitudes and positions within the system. Members of art worlds outside New York—on every continent, including North America—are likewise provincial, although in different ways. The projection of the New York art world as the metropolitan center for art by every other art world is symptomatic of the provincialism of each of them.

Most of us treat this projection as if it were a construction of reality—and it is, in the sense that it is almost universally shared. However, those who are able to live adequately within the framework of respect for the essential differentness of diverse yet related cultures recognize that the projection does not have the force of “natural law.” It is rather, a viewpoint that, while effectively governing majority behaviour, is as culturally relative as any other. That is, it is one among many ways of defining the (different) situations we are in.

Yet, whatever one’s approach, the complex of metropolitan/provincial interrelationships persistently impinges. While they are obviously denoted in some (perhaps most) artworks, they are connoted by all. Shelving the questions they raise as insoluble or trivial is irresponsible. Awareness of these questions has consequences for action throughout the art system. They set a problematic relevant to all of us.

I propose to begin to deal with this problematic by exploring the patterns of provincialism in Australian art. These quickly expose, by contrast and comparison, a

range of similar patterns in American art. Much of my method will consist in stating the obvious—a somewhat unusual procedure in this area of debate.

Like its political history, the development of Australian art is typified by variations on the theme of dependence. Although all variations were not responses to changes in British art, they were for the most part until the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> British art itself has rarely been innovative since the mid-nineteenth century. It, too, progressed largely in terms of its capacity to absorb the weaker—or if you prefer, the more subtle—aspects of succeeding waves of French art movements. Australian artists, therefore, got their stimulation at second remove. Indeed when Abstract Expressionism became prominent in the early 1950s, Australian painters tended to respond to the European responses to it—that is, to *l'art informel*, the Cobra group, the Spanish texture painters, etc.<sup>2</sup>

But this is hardly a mechanical process. Australian artists have not responded to each and every European movement. Nineteenth-century Realism, Dada and Pop art, for example, found few followers. All the other styles, however, have had small to quite large bands of advocates who devote their artistic maturity to mastering, then elaborating aspects of the initiatives of those they have imitated. This process continues unabated today, like a succession of faithful echoes, always open to replenishment at the sound of a new call from the other side of the divide.

Nor are the European/American styles adopted whole. Their character is distorted because acquaintance with them is late, usually with the mature forms of the style. The early innovative struggles are simply not available outside of the limited cultural situation in which they arise. If a visiting artist chances upon them, they are usually incomprehensible to him. Further distortions occur when works are seen only in reproduction, and are accompanied by inadequate criticism and gnostic artist's statements. In short, models and prototypes arrive in the provinces devoid of their genetic contexts. They carry, and are transformed by, the fact of their coming from the metropolitan center. They seem to issue, as it were, directly out of art, to be made by "cultural heroes," and to take their predestined place as one of a succession of "great moments" in art history.

Isolation gives these cultural exports a connotation perhaps unsuspected by their makers—they can hardly fail to reinforce a vicious circle of conservatism. Ian Milliss puts his point succinctly:

In Australia where the cultural roots of the dominant white society are geographically on the other side of the world, 'official culture' with its distortions of history is accepted almost universally, because the physical evidence that would contradict it is lacking. This dissolution is particularly telling amongst political radicals; they either accept "official culture" unquestioningly, as the Labor Party has in its formation of the Council for the Arts, or unthinkingly reject culture in its entirety for pure politics. Either way they render the social change they seek impossible.<sup>3</sup>

But geographic isolation is only one measure of cultural distancing from metropolitan centers. It is inescapably obvious that most artists the world over live in art communities that are formed by a relentless provincialism. Their worlds are replete with tensions between two antithetical terms: a defiant urge to localism (a claim for the possibility and validity of "making good, original art right here") and a reluctant recognition that the generative innovations in art, and the criteria for standards of "quality," "originality," "interest," "forcefulness," etc., are determined externally. Far from encouraging innocent art of naive purity, untainted by "too much history and too much thinking," provincialism, in fact, produces highly self-conscious art "obsessed with the problem of what its identity ought to be."<sup>4</sup>

In this provincialist bind, it is surprising that Australian artists have created as much "interesting" work as they have. They now exhibit all over the world with unexceptional regularity, put on "strong showings" in international exhibitions, are written about in the magazines, etc. That is to say, within the last 20 years we have learned to what everybody else does in art, and do it as well as most. But so has almost everybody else: the European-North and South American art circuit is studded with artists from everywhere making competent art within current categories. The art fairs have become condemned to insufferable dullness by their own success in promoting international sameness.

New York remains the metropolitan center for the visual arts, to which artists living in rest of America, in Holland, Germany, Brazil, England, France, Japan, Australia, etc. stand in a provincial relationship. They are making art indistinguishable from that of the majority of New York artists but their art needs to funnel through New York before it has a chance to significantly “change the culture,” even the culture back home. New York, of course, depends essentially on these inputs from foreign artists.

Accelerated avant-gardism is an institutionalized pillar of the New York art world. Indeed, New York seeks to guarantee its continuance as the metropolitan center by writing the rules of the game in avant-gardist terms—and in such a way that it remains the sole judge of who gets to play, of how one plays, and of who wins. Such highly conventionalized avant-gardism seems to reflect art’s modern history (although that, too, is continually recast so that it remains the major authority for current moves) less than it does the specific dynamics of a market on which artists compete to sell their closely similar selves.

If one accepts this system, its rewards can be attractive: a sense of being deeply tested, of lining up against the best from everywhere, of believing that one’s acts count within art and in the whole culture—not to mention celebrity and money. But with or without the rewards, and no matter how accepting or protesting one is, the system’s unceasing invitations to bad faith force an isolation of self on everyone concerned with it. New York’s most typically local (i.e., regional) characteristic might be the totality of its self-contradiction as a possible culture. Membership in this culture is paradoxically secured in alienation from it.

The accelerated avant-gardism of the metropolitan center looks even more threatening from a position within a provincial art community. How do I judge these new styles? Which one renders the one I’m working in redundant? How does it do so? Can I adapt, expand, extend my art to meet this new challenge? If I can’t, what is there for me?

The provincial artist, then, sees his commitment to art in terms of *styles* of art’ of competing notions of art’s *history*—all determined in the metropolitan center. The

main structure of his self-image is accepted, not invented. Self-construction, at levels that he might feel to be fundamental, constantly eludes him, especially as he makes his art. This is part of the reason why in Australia no avant-garde art and, with fitful exceptions (for example William Dobell), little deeply competent academic art, has emerged. At most, eccentrically eclectic blends with a local accent have occurred—e.g., the painting of Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd. These can be quite strong and consistent over time, as in the painting of Fred Williams. But they are rare and unfruitful for other local artists.

A cruel irony of provincialism is that while the artist pays exaggerated homage to the conceptions of art history and the standards for judging “quality,” “significance,” “interest,” etc., of the metropolitan center, he has, by definition of his situation, no way of (from his distance) affecting those conceptions and standard. He may satisfy his local audience, but to the international audience he is mostly invisible, sometimes amusingly exotic.

The cultural transmission is one-way: whereas both Jackson Pollock and Sidney Nolan are seen as “great artists” by the art audience in Australia, it is inconceivable that Nolan should be so regarded in New York. And in Australia, Nolan’s “greatness” is of a different order from Pollock’s. Nolan is admired as a great *Australian* artist, while Pollock is taken to be a great artist—his Americanness accepted as a secondary aspect of his achievement qua artist. In such circumstances, the most to which the provincial artist can aspire is to be considered second-rate. Thus, the superficial plausibility of the remark that while provincial societies have produced many fine artists, they have, at least in this century, produced no great ones.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, a bad case of double standards operates here. Whole concepts of art are being formed on the basis of imperfectly assimilated international (i.e., for recent art, New York art world) criteria. Estimations of the achievement of local artists are based sometimes on these, sometimes on determinants that acknowledge the inherent limitations of the local scene. Under the first the artist invariably loses, under the second he might win too easily. If the local artist and his audience take the metropolitan/provincial dichotomy as fundamental, it often seems that nothing but

this shuttling between standards can go on until, by some miracle, the local art world itself becomes a metropolitan center.

In Australia irresolutions such as these pervade the culture. Artists live uneasily within it. None can feel part of a community large enough, diverse enough, to be self-sustaining—an illusion often given by New York. For the past decade a cliché has centered on a so-called boom in Australian painting. But many more artists, a few with small international reputations, add up only to flashier decoration on the affluence of the rising middle class of the country. It hardly means a vital, confident art community; and the question of how the “significance” of the art is to be measured still eludes answer.

The stylistic diversity of international art during the past 15 years reverberates throughout recent Australian art. The last local movement of any strength was colour painting following Noland, Olitski, Stella and others, centering around Central Street Gallery, Sydney, during the latter 1960s, and enshrined in a major exhibition, “The Field,” at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, in 1968.<sup>6</sup> Of those who continue to elaborate these concerns Peter Booth’s work is notable. Many painters moved to a more lyrical abstraction as, for example, David Aspden. Tony McGillick’s sprayed draped wall pieces literalize a loosening of formal constraints. Robert Hunter’s work with tapes and paint on plastered walls subtly explores a kind of reductiveness. New Realist painters abound, of course, but older practitioners, with background in aspects of Pop art, such as Mike Brown, Richard Larter, and Brett Whiteley, seem to generate more energetic imagery.

In recent years, however, an inventiveness encouraged by open form sculpture, process, environmental, and performance art has marked Australian art. This ranges from the restraint of Nigel Lendon’s systematically arranged metal sculpture to the documentation of interpersonal social situations by Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr.<sup>7</sup>

A (perhaps) peculiarly Australian approach to creativity, reemerging through the successive imported styles, might be said to characterize the work of a number of young sculptors who revel in their eccentricity and awkwardness. John Armstrong

and Aleks Danko, for example, bring together unusual images in a way that affords unexpected amusement, while Tony Coleing and Ti Parks highlight much of the absurdity inherent in the oddly uncomfortable conjunction of Australian artifacts in the Australian environment with wit and judgment. Of the sculptors who work directly with and into the local natural environment, Ross Grounds seems among the more sophisticated. This list is selective, and the descriptions are admittedly rather neutral and bland, but a range of exploration conventional to the categories of international art, with a touch of local color, seems fundamental to the way Australian art develops.

Can the provincial bind be broken? Waves of hope recur cyclically. In the 1920s “nativeness” was celebrated. In the mid 1940s a number of painters (later called the “Antipodeans”) placed their faith in a localism pursued with sharp awareness of European traditions. During the “50s and “60s, following the influence of Abstract Expressionism, hope grew for the possibility of an avant-garde “breakthrough.” By the end of the decade, with the rise of art centers throughout Europe and in various American cities, it seemed that the time of a liberating “global village internationalism” had arrived. In the last year (a relatively) large and (generally speaking) enlightened funding of the arts by the new Labor government has aroused even greater confidence.

These pleadings for rescue to external forces most clearly attest to provincialism’s relentless entrapment. There seems no way around the fact that as long as strong metropolitan centers like New York continue to define the state of play, and other centers continue to accept the rules of the game, all the other centers will be provincial, ipso facto. *As the situation stands, the provincial artist cannot choose not to be provincial.* The complex history of the “expatriates,” most of whom eventually return, highlights this dilemma.

With variations, the pattern of expatriation is this: As soon as he is able the young provincial artist leaves for the metropolitan center, where he picks up competencies for art-making in terms of the most obviously “advanced” style, along with a taste for at least some aspects of the center’s community dynamism (for example, the ready availability of a number of active audiences). Returning home, he proselytizes his

new vision of artwork and art world around Sydney and Melbourne, often winning converts, throwing others into the position of reactionaries, and competing with acolytes of different metropolitan avant-gardisms until his initiative runs aground.

Having at no point been “in on” the seminal impulses which generated his adopted style, he no longer knows how to continue within its framework; and the local art world is incapable of acting as a dynamic audience. He might then return to the metropolitan center only to discover that the style to which he has committed himself has changed in incomprehensible or unbridgeable ways. Also, its authority will probably have diminished, the singularity of its energy and confidence abated, its proponents engaged in the futile rear guard actions against the newest avant-gardism. The provincial artist returns home to find to his dismay, the same crisis building up for him. Most artists are flexible enough to go one or two rounds in this circus, but after that it becomes increasingly debilitating.

This pattern may well account for the curious fact that the “history” of a provincial art, as it is experienced locally, is mostly written by younger artists, whereas what tends to be valued by overseas visitors are the unique-looking compromises of older artists. What, in their anthropological romanticism, the visitors fail to see is that the “native” accents are often the result of efforts to wed local traditionalisms to newly imported features. But, because the traditions are likewise hybrids, the mixture grows weaker. Struggling on in the hope that *the situation* will somehow change seems to be the lot of the provincial artist. The crucial point remains that, outside the metropolitan center, the individual artist is not himself the agent of significant change. Larger forces control the shape of his development as an artist.

All these remarks apply to artists in, say, Phoenix, Arizona (where, for example, Fritz Scholder’s presentation of Indian themes in a light Francis Bacon style are currently causing much excitement), in San Francisco and, ultimately, in Chicago and Los Angeles as well. The only way an artist has a chance to make a “significant” contribution, one which will have implications for “the culture in general,” seems to be to get him or herself to New York and stay here. Or, at the very least, to stay in some constant relationship to this art world. The reason being, it is here that

“significance” is determined and will continue to be as long as these determinations are accepted throughout the rest of the world.

But merely being in New York, one among 40,000 artists in the city, doesn't guarantee anything. It just opens the possibility of access to the art world's power structure. In this way, provincialism pervades New York, precisely in that the overwhelming majority of artists here exist in a satellite relationship to a few artists, galleries, critics, collectors, museums, and magazines like this one.

There is a structural hierarchy in the operation of the international art world that centers on the bright stars in the constellation, the few artists, galleries, etc., who are “on top” this decade. No matter how naturally part of the New York art world they might feel, however personally humble they might be as individuals, they remain the ones who define what currently defines art in the culture. In so doing, they become the only artists with the chance to project their work into the long-term history of art. What gives them these powers is their exemplification of one simple, fundamental law within the rule-governed activity which art-making is: whereas most artists are rule-following, these are both rule-following and *rule-generating* creators. They propose ways of making art that “falsify” given ways, they satisfy doubts about these given ways, and they generate new problem areas for other artists to explore. Above all, they are in a situation which is culturally privileged for making their moves count.

I have in mind—to cite only some recent examples—Stella, Judd, LeWitt and perhaps Kaprow and Morris, but only these artists as represented by certain works: Stella's black paintings of the late '50s, Judd's 1965-66 sculptures, LeWitt's 1966-67 framework structures, Kaprow's early Happenings, Morris' endless variety. The borders shift: Smithson or say, di Suvero would replace Kaprow and Morris for some, Beuys would replace them both for others. To formalists, Noland and Olitski would replace Stella, and Caro would banish Judd and LeWitt. How one fits out this star system depends on one's viewpoint, but the system itself remains constant.

Only the most myopic elitist can regard the hierarchical rigidity, the inbuilt unfairness, of the New York art world with equanimity. It casts most of us all the

time, and a few of us some of the time, into the provincialist bind, whether we live in New York or outside. The further away we live, the less we can rationalize our entrapment.

Few would not find the picture I have drawn offensive—I certainly do. Everywhere one goes, one hears that New York is declining as *the* art center, that there are alternatives. Some artists turn their backs on the problem and submerge their lives and their art in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio; others feel adequately sustained by their day-to-day life experience in one of the world's great cities; still others try to retreat to country barns (especially after they have some kind of financially viable reputation going in the city). All these are withdrawals to a kind of rationalized regionalism—and this raises some hard questions as to whether, for example, Southwestern art, or minority-group identifications in the art world, are not category-crutches.

It may be, of course, that these moves are less withdrawals from the demands of art than relocations of the (same) demands. It could happen that one of them will, by virtue of its confinement, generate art that sets its own terms of “significance” and persuades other audiences of the validity of these terms. It may indeed be the case (as increasingly many are arguing) that New York is hanging on as the metropolitan art center by default and convention. It may be. But we have to act according to the given situation and that situation is now structured in such a way that most of us are provincial artists, satellites to the few “superstars” who have broken the bind.

The provincialism problem doesn't end at this unpleasant impasse—it goes deeper. Those who have broken the bind have done so largely because the system is structured so that several artists every few years *have* to break the bind. They are catalytic to the system's self-perpetuation; it forces them to come out “on top.” How one gets to be one of these culture heroes is only partly a matter of one's planning. Nearly everyone in the New York art world takes approximately the right steps toward candidacy. The structural movements of the art world transform a few into winners, in an ad hoc, variable, irregular but nonetheless unflinching way.

As Ian Burn has pointed out, there are *responsibilities* here for American artists and their critical supporters.<sup>8</sup> They are the leading participants, whether wittingly or not, in a game whose rules, by which all artists must play but which can be written only by them, make it inevitable that only they can win and all others lose. This is the same kind of trick that underlies the authoritarian assumptions of superiority displayed by U.S. foreign policy. Instead, we should look to the benefits that would accrue to all from acting in a way which projects our own uncertainties and fallibilities undisguised and which value the differences of the cultures relative to ours.

For example, many American cultural institutions have international programs. The Museum of Modern Art is perhaps the most active—in the past 12 months it has toured exhibitions throughout Europe, South America, Australia and elsewhere. Such exhibitions may not be intended as tools of cultural imperialism, but it would be naive to believe that they do not have precisely this effect. Although they may be conceived in the spirit of making available otherwise inaccessible art so as to provide a basis for human communication at levels “transcending” political differences (itself an astonishingly naive concept), when they emerge from the New York art world I have described, they cannot but carry the condescending implication of superiority. This is reinforced by the fact that the very urge to unity that attends any organizational job tends to give the work shown on such occasions a specious certainty of purpose and a misleading coherence as a range of cultural products.

The vicious circle of metropolitan initiative-provincial submission continues strengthened. In an important sense, such exhibitions cannot fail to be counter-productive until they are redundant, that is, until the receiving country has founded an authentic, sustaining culture of its own. Then, they would become enriching. At present, it seems that the most responsible kind of exhibition would be one that took as its aim, not the supposedly “neutral” presentation of a selection of art-work, but the display of the very problematic which its own incursion into a provincial situation raises. This would be difficult, certainly requiring an unusual degree of reflexivity and some rethinking of the nature of exhibitions, but it is surely not impossible.

Similarly, critical articles, such as those appearing regularly in this and other magazines, which give a systematic, homogenized immutability to the development

of an artist's work, do artists the world over the disservice of promoting a model of art-making which not only distorts reality but also cannot be matched. In this way, closed concepts of art are spread with an extra and unwarranted loading of authority, unnecessary confusions arise, and inventiveness is inhibited.

Some critical theories, it seems, are more readily exportable than others. In Australia, as elsewhere, certain artists and critics have recently swallowed the formalist/modernist line whole. Artists trapped within the provincialist bind are hard put to resist what amounts to an invitation to join the mainstream of art history by merely making work which conforms to certain easily grasped formal conventions and which subscribes to a crude set of rules which hint at how to "innovate" within those conventions. To be *actually* invited from the provinces to show in New York by one of the art world power-brokers, as was the Canadian Jack Bush by Clement Greenberg, must seem to be "making it" out of the bind in a big way. Yet, if the "master himself" fails to perform the election, his local critical disciples back home in the colonies will act as surrogates—in an "almost as if..." way. There are alternatives in Australian criticism, the strongest being that of Donald Brook. But others, such as Patrick McCaughey and Elwyn Lynn, seem only too happy to continue the pattern of provincialist submission. Theirs is an externally given promise depending on the ultimate in conformity to (one set of) standards entirely foreign to the provincial artist's responsibilities—which are to himself *in* this culture in terms of its integrity relative to other cultures.

Finally, artists who permit their works to be used in these ways by curators and critics need to reassess just what their ideological commitments amount to. Few can persist in pretending that instinctual devotion to an amorphous metaphysical entity "art" frees them from the responsibilities which clearly follow from recognizing art-making for what it is: a thoroughly context-dependent activity, in which most of the contexts are socially specific and resonant throughout the cultural settings in which they occur and to which they travel. Just how these responsibilities count in each particular artist's work and attitudes is, ultimately, a matter specific to him or her. But whatever the approach, it should be clear that refusing to face these responsibilities has consequences not only for oneself but for other artists, critics, curators, etc.—all, like

oneself, more or less subject to the pernicious destructiveness of provincialism. There are no ideologically neutral cultural acts.

1. The classic study of these patterns is Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1970* (Melbourne: rev. ed. 1971).
2. See Patrick McCaughey, "Notes on the Centre: New York," *Quadrant*, Sydney (July-August. 1970), 76-80, and my reply "Provincialism in Art," *ibid.* (March-April, 1971): 67-71.
3. Catalogue essay, *Object and Idea*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1973.
4. Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia* (Harmondsworth, rev. ed., 1970), 314.
5. George Steiner, in a recent discussion of the demise of European classical humanist culture in America, notes a second-rate quality throughout current American culture—with, he adds, the "challenging" exception of recent visual art, *In Bluebeard's Castle, some notes towards the re-definition of culture* (London, Faber, 1971).
6. See my "Color-form painting: Sydney 1965-70," *Other Voices*, Sydney, (June-July, 1970), 6-17.
7. These tendencies emerged in exhibitions at (primarily) Pinacotheca artists' cooperative gallery, Melbourne, and at Inhibodress and Watters galleries, Sydney. They were explored in the following exhibitions: "The Situation Now: Object and Post-Object Art," Contemporary Art Society Gallery, Sydney, 1971; "Sculpturescape," Mildura Art Gallery; "Object and Idea," National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; and "Recent Australian Art," Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, all 1973.
8. (With Mel Ramsden), "Provincialism," *Art Dialogue*, Melbourne, no. 1, October, 1973, 3-11; and as "Art is what we do, culture is what we do to other artists,"

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*Deurle II.7.73*, Deurle, Belgium, 1973.