

The invention of curatorship in Australia

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Review of:

Recent Past. Writing Australian Art by Daniel Thomas, edited by Hannah Fink and Steven Miller, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales/Thames and Hudson, 1 December 2020, pp. 348, 119 col. plates, 14 b. & w. illus., Aus. \$. 64.99. ISBN. 9781741741506.



Figure 1 *Daniel Thomas on his ninetieth birthday at Loeyunnilla with a painting by Peter Booth and a wooden snake at his feet by Rover Thomas. Photograph. Jaynie Anderson.*

Why does the history of Australian art get written about the way it does in the form of repetitive chronological monographs? Hannah Fink's idea to publish some 75 pieces of critical writing by Daniel Thomas (fig. 1), a legendary figure in the Australian art world, written between 1949 to 2020, is a welcome innovation, that engages the reader with contemporary art as it is exhibited and interpreted over decades in different parts of Australia. As the bibliography of his writings at the end of the book attests, there were almost a thousand to choose from. Together with Steven Miller (Fig. 2), the archivist of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Fink has



Figure 2 Hannah Fink and Steven Miller, Editors of *Recent Past*, in Tasmania. Photograph by Jaynie Anderson.

selected articles, acquisition reports, catalogue entries, short and long reviews of books, exhibitions, films, and meaningful obituaries, all from a wide range of sources, principally about Australian art but also including European and American art exhibited in Australia. The book has enjoyed instant critical success, selling out in three weeks, to be reprinted in September 2021, and receiving rave reviews.¹ Daniel Thomas is always known as Daniel in the Australian art world. His success is in part due to multiple achievements, how he created an audience for contemporaneity in Australia, but most of all for the innovative forms of art writing. It is a surprising book, always generous and always inventive. Many articles are printed as they originally were, but others are given in a fuller form before a copywriter pruned them, and on many there are additional witty updates in a final comment, signed **DT 20**. A case in point is this laconic update of his article on the performance artists, Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik, brought to Australia as part of the John Kaldor Art Projects, that reveals the unexpected challenges of a curator working with performance.²

DT 20. ‘In Adelaide I had noted Moorman’s performance of *Cut Piece*, with audience members cutting her gown piece-by piece off her body “supervised by an art gallery curator”. I am not sure I was the supervising curator in

¹ Luke Slattery, ‘The Care Taker’, *The Australian*, *Wish* supplement, June 2021, 38-42; Julie Ewington, ‘Hidding in the Detail. An Insider’s view of Australian art’, *Australian Book Review*, December 2020, no. 427; Ann Stephen, *Art Monthly Australasia*; Martin Edmond, ‘Grace in all Simplicity’, *Sydney Review of Books*, 17 June 2021, 327, Autumn 2021; <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/thomas-recent-past/> accessed online 18 July 2021.

² First published as ‘Moorman and Paik in Australia’, *Art and Australia*, 14, I (1976), reprinted in *Recent Past*, 82-87.

Adelaide, but it is likely. Moorman explained it had to be someone she had got to know and felt safe with, and by then I had been around for eight days.'

As a schoolboy in the 1940's at Geelong Grammar School, Daniel was introduced to experimental ideas in art, whether abstraction or radical design by a school master who was an exceptional teacher, the immigrant German Jewish artist from the Weimar Bauhaus, Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack (fig. 3).³ Daniel's first article, 'On reading Gertrude Stein' was written for the school magazine, *If Revived*, in 1949, at the age of 11, a literary journal he co-edited with Rupert Murdoch. Even earlier, when aged seven, Daniel and his twin brother Snow, had been taken across Australia, by their fearless Queenslander mother, Jean Thomas, to escape the epidemic of polio that raged the country. They followed the route of Burke and Wills, some 6000 miles across central Australia, and on the way visited Albert Namatjira at Hermannsburg from whom Daniel bought some souvenir art. He continued to collect throughout his life. Thus, from the time he was a kid Daniel acquired a never-ending passion for art of different kinds. He was always at ease with radicalism, as few were and are, and was endowed with an uncompromising eye for quality. He continued to be involved with significant figures in the art world throughout his life.

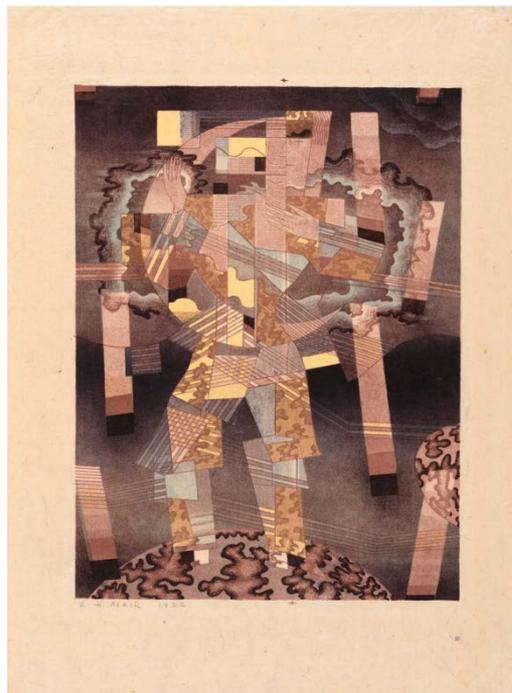


Figure 3 Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack. *Reaching the Stars* 1922. Colour lithograph. 42.3 x 31.6 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased 1961.

³ Daniel's tribute, 'Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack', for an Émigré artists issue of *Art and Australia*, 1993, is reprinted in *Recent Past*, 140-143. See Tim Fisher, 'Hirschfeld-Mack, Ludwig (1893-1965)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hirschfeld-mack-ludwig-10510/text18651>, published first in hardcopy 1996, accessed online 18 July 2021.

With a recommendation from Sir James Darling, headmaster at Geelong, Daniel was interviewed for Oriel College, Oxford, defined as the 'history college', as the Provost Sir George Clark, known as Nobby, was an economic historian and former Regius Professor. Daniel's tutor was an eccentric mediaeval historian, Billy Pantin (William Abel Pantin), remembered for his contributions to the study of architecture and the outrageous mess of books in his study. At the Oriel interview with many dons, around a long table, Daniel was asked what he was interested in apart from history, to which he replied: museums. Daniel arrived in Oriel for Michaelmas term in September 1953 and completed his degree at the end of Trinity term 1956. He bought a Vespa and spent the long vacations out of term travelling to European museums in major and provincial cities. In Oxford the Ashmolean, then and now, was a museum with a varied collection, that went far beyond painting. His favourite work was Paolo Uccello's teasing masterpiece *The Hunt in the Forest*, an early Italian experiment playing games with perspective in the dark.

Although there were no art historians teaching in Oxford in the early fifties, he did manage to take a course on the Italian Renaissance in the history Faculty and was aware of the Keeper of Western Art, Sir Karl Parker, a devoted and discerning connoisseur of Renaissance drawing. The collection in the Ashmolean print room began with drawings by Michelangelo and Raphael, and Parker built it up to become one of the best in the world. The exciting field in the 1950's was Baroque art which was being rediscovered and developed singlehandedly by Denis Mahon, an Irishman who introduced Italian seventeenth-century painting to the British. Mahon, created his own Baroque collection, bequeathed later to major galleries in London and Dublin. Daniel bought Mahon's *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory* (1947). Thus, Daniel's formation as an art critic/historian combined the wild enchantment of Bauhaus experimentation from his school days with the rigour of an Oxford degree in modern history.

When Daniel returned to Australia, he was interviewed by Tony Tuckson for the post of professional assistant at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Part of the interview consisted of a walk through the gallery, during which Daniel was asked to identify a work on loan from a private collection? Daniel recognised it as a Bernardo Strozzi, an artist with an idiosyncratic style, whom he had encountered in Genoese museums. During Tuckson's lifetime he was known as a curator, praised for his early acquisitions of indigenous art, but he also painted (secretly?), to be later recognised as one of the most significant abstract artists of his generation.⁴ In all of Daniel's writing there is an excitement about objects, an enchantment, combined with rigorous documentation in fascinating detail. Parker invented connoisseurship for generations of curators of drawing in Oxford, and Daniel reinvented it in Australia for indigenous art, for abstraction and indeed everything that was Australian. Like earlier art historians, connoisseurship was about authenticity, but the criteria for different forms of Australian art, whether Streeton or Rover Thomas, provoked original analysis. At that date there was no Australian art history taught in universities, so pioneering took place in museums.

As a critic Daniel was fearless in whom he chose to write about, indifferent

⁴ See 'Painting Forever: Tony Tuckson', in *Art Monthly Australia*, 2000, reprinted in *Recent Past*, 162-198.

to canons of taste, or bossy people in the art market. As he says in the preface: 'Collection curators have to work against fashion and celebrity, or at least leave the pushy artists and showy works of art to look after themselves. Collection curators must protect quiet or neglected art, coax modest work into the public arena, preserve it for changes in taste, help the development of a better-informed consensus, provide a detailed basis for the broad theorising, that might be made in the museum itself but will most often be made in the academy – and for the museum get in ahead of rising markets to acquire work to which their own research has added value'.⁵

During Daniel's lengthy career, between North Down (Tasmania), Sydney, Canberra and Adelaide, he wrote continually. The book is distinguished from others in that it presents what was happening in different collections in Australia, whereas other accounts of Australian art are limited to the cities an author knows best, for example Bernard Smith's classic *Australian Painting 1788-1960* (1962), which is based on galleries in Sydney and Melbourne, and limited to flat art.⁶ The only exception is the *Cambridge Companion to Australian art*, significantly dedicated to Daniel. A book that illustrates innumerable sites, archaeological and museums, private collections, and looks at the earliest indigenous art until the digital age.⁷ The kinds of art Daniel conspicuously enjoyed when he wrote about them are multiple: painting (especially abstract art), sculpture, architecture, printmaking, drawing, installation, performance, colonial silver table ware. Bernard Smith has been criticised for omissions in his canon, his neglect of woman artists, aboriginal art and for disliking abstraction, whereas Daniel Thomas wrote about all these aspects of Australian art with enthusiasm.

Performance is usually considered a genre apart, but here it is consistently significant. Daniel was often involved in John Kaldor's art projects that began in 1969 with Christo's spectacular *Wrapped coast, one million square feet, Little Bay, Sydney*. In 1978 Daniel edited the catalogue for the Australian Pavilion for the Venice Biennale, *from nature to art, from art to nature: Australia: John Davis, Robert Owen, Ken Unsworth*, presenting unforgettable sculptures, including Unsworth's suspended stone circle and performance pieces (fig. 4). In 1984 Kaldor's one export project, which Daniel executed, was *An Australian Accent: Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, Ken Unsworth*, for PS1, a leading contemporary art space in New York the exhibition coinciding with the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's new building extension.

Throughout *Recent Past*, descriptions of abstract art stand out as being highly original and important for the formation of taste. When writing on Ian Fairweather,

⁵ Daniel Thomas, 'Being a curator', in *Recent Past*, 23.

⁶ On Bernard Smith's major contributions to Australian cultural life, as well as his omissions, see *The Legacies of Bernard Smith. Essays on Australian Art, History and Cultural Politics*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, Christopher R. Marshall and Andrew Yip, Sydney: Power Publications and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2006, especially Ian McLean, 'Bernard Smith's blind spot: Aboriginal and Australian Art', 338-351.

⁷ *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, Melbourne, 2011.

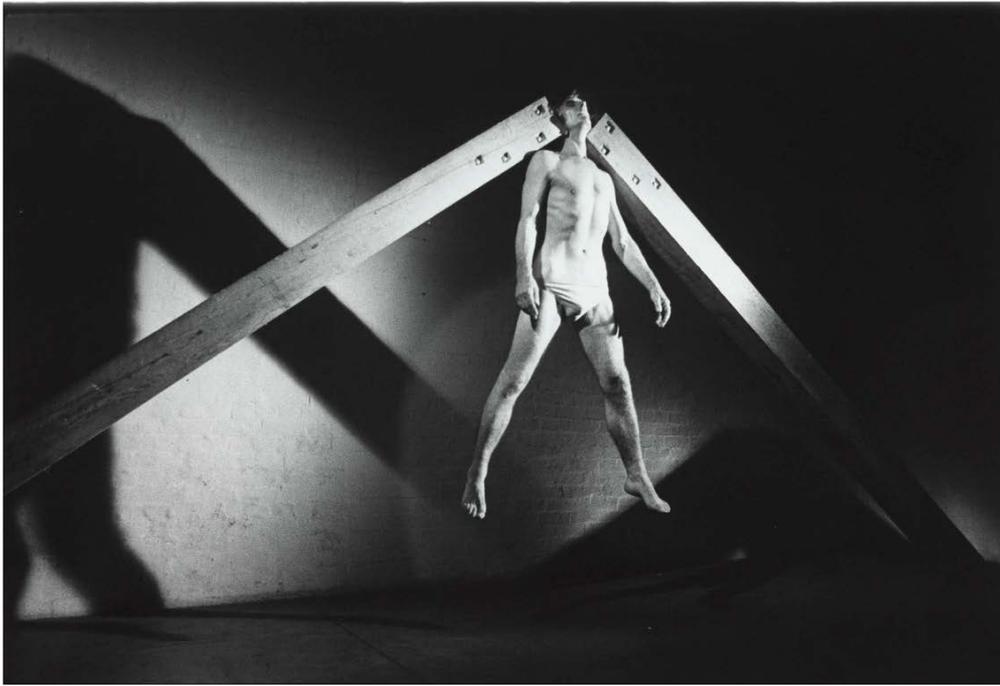


Figure 4 Ken Unsworth. *Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual, and Burial piece (detail)* 1978. No 10 from a set of 15 performance documentation shot. Gelatin silver photograph, 19.1 x 28.2 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, purchased 1976.

an eccentric British born artist, now recognised as the most significant twentieth-century artist in Australia, Daniel was one of the earliest to understand his significance. In 1962 Daniel considered Fairweather as ‘the most dependably high experience in Australia art’ and continued to do so, as when he described Fairweather’s 1963 exhibition as ‘the most sustained aesthetic experience of the year’, arguing that ‘the quality of his line and the scale of his forms are more than enough to endow such abstractions with a profound humanism’. The importance of these reviews in the developing critical appreciation of Fairweather is acknowledged in Claire Robert’s compelling recent book on Fairweather and China.⁸

In the twenty-first century museum curators do not usually collect as such an activity might be conceived as a conflict of interest. But Daniel was ahead of the pack and always was a collector. There is much in this book about what he collected for himself, as well as for the national collections that he curated. His own collection is now at his home, *Loeyunnila*, at Northdown Beach, near Port Sorell, in Northern Tasmania, in a house designed by Andrew Andersons, a Latvian born Australian museum architect. Andersons and Thomas collaborated on the extension to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the late 1960’s, one of the most joyous entries to any gallery in Australia, with glimpses of the harbour, that gallery viewers and exhibition makers loved.⁹ Daniel’s double ended timber home is conceived by Andersons with a nod to Renzo Piano’s Menil Collection in Houston, particularly in reference to the natural top lighting. It is ideal for the display of the collection, that

⁸ Claire Roberts, *Fairweather and China*, Melbourne, 2021, 109, 111, 185, 188 and 239.

⁹ Daniel Thomas, ‘Andrew Andersons: Museums and city-making’, *Art and Australia*, 34, no 2 (1996), reprinted in *Recent Past*, 156-159.

Thomas recently gifted to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG), Hobart. The collection contains significant works by Peter Booth, Mike Parr, Ken Unsworth, to name a few, as well as a surprising number of important indigenous barks, collected at the time he worked with Tony Tuckson, and later when director of the Art Gallery of South Australia.

For a symposium organised by the Australian Institute of Art History, at the University of Melbourne, first published in this journal,¹⁰ Daniel approached the question of the colloquium: 'Aboriginal Art: Who was interested?', taking exception to the tendentious claim that interest in Aboriginal art was only recent, by tracing art museum interest in Aboriginal art from the time of the arrival of the first settlers in Australia and throughout the developing museum culture. Although Bernard Smith had been criticised for omitting Australian indigenous art from *Australian Painting 1788-1960* (1962), Thomas generously argues this was because Tony Tuckson's *Australian Aboriginal Art* (1964) was being published at the same time, and Smith may have seen it as a companion volume. Tuckson's book followed a travelling exhibition of indigenous art in 1962 that was shown in six states and was widely influential. As the concluding statement to the article Thomas remarked on the presence of indigenous art in the collecting institutions of Australia, asserting 'cultural difference and their aesthetic excellence in the company of international superstars Gerhard Richter or Andy Warhol'.

A considerable part of the writings are from recent years, conceived near Daniel's birthplace of North Down Beach in Northern Tasmania from his home on a cliff top above Bass Strait. The spirit of place is deeply meaningful to him, as it was when his ancestors came in the 1830's, equipped with Uvedale Price's handbook on the *Picturesque*, their aide to choosing a site. The melancholy landscape is celebrated in a metre and a half canvas by the English artist, John Glover, who made Tasmania his home. The spirit of this place, where he was born, has engendered some of the best writing from Daniel in his mature years. The late Andrew Sayers defined Daniel Thomas 'as the single most influential curator in creating a shape for the history of Australian art.'¹¹ Another selection of Daniel Thomas's writings, concentrating on museums, display and curatorship would be most welcome, as an inspiration for young students, and as an informal history of display in Australian collecting institutions.

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¹⁰ Thomas, 'Aboriginal Art: Who was interested?', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 4, June 2011, in Jaynie Anderson, Guest Editor, volume four of the *Journal of Art Historiography*, 4 June 2011, <http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-4-june-2011/> *Journal of Art Historiography*, Australian Art Historiography, 4, 2011, [http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/Selected by the National Library of Australia, and archived on 27 June 2011, as a publication of national significance, http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-127665/](http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/Selected%20by%20the%20National%20Library%20of%20Australia,%20and%20archived%20on%2027%20June%202011,%20as%20a%20publication%20of%20national%20significance,%20http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-127665/) Reprinted in *Recent Past*, 262-275.

¹¹ Quoted by the Editors in their introduction, *Recent Past*, 15.

Arts at the University of Melbourne, and from 2008 to 2012 was President of the International Committee for Art History (CIHA). In 2015 she received a knighthood from the President of the Republic of Italy for distinguished research on Venetian Renaissance art. In 2021 she received the order of Australia for her distinguished contribution to tertiary education in Australia, especially art history. Among her many books is *Giorgione. The Painter of Poetic Brevity*, 1997, and more recently, *The Life of Giovanni Morelli in Risorgimento Italy*, 2019, and *The Invention of Melbourne*, 2019. She is currently curator of an exhibition on Giorgione for the Palazzo Reale, Milan, for 2024.



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