

Tracing cultural values through popular art historiographies: Australian popular magazines and the visual arts

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Introduction

One of the most famous artworks in Australian art history is not an Australian artwork. Jackson Pollock's painting *Blue Poles* (1952) has achieved iconic status not only within Australian art history but within Australian political, social and cultural histories more broadly. Acquired by the newly established Australian National Gallery¹ in 1973 for a then record sum of AU\$1.3 million (US\$2 million), it was so expensive that its purchase required personal approval from the prime minister of the day, Gough Whitlam. At 212.1 x 488.9 cm in size it was so large that it could not be hung in any existing gallery in its new hometown of Canberra; the future National Gallery had not yet been built and did not actually open until 1982.² Also known by its alternate title *Number 11, 1952*, the Abstract Expressionist painting is, as curator Sarina Noordhuis-Fairfax describes, 'a prime example of [Pollock's] unique approach to action painting'.³ Its purchase proved extremely contentious, receiving widespread news coverage in the Australian media that included ardent criticism and fervent support. Narratives of the 'controversial' artwork – with its hefty price tag, abstract style, and unconventional American creator – became embedded in Australian public discourse. *Blue Poles* continues to influence, reveal, and perpetuate narratives of cultural and artistic value in Australia. Its cultural impact is such that *The Economist* can write in 2016, without irony or malice, that an American artist's 'drips and drabs [have become] a symbol of modern Australia'.⁴

The stories that swirl around *Blue Poles* represent one of the most influential syntheses of art, media, political and cultural histories in Australia.⁵ When

¹ Now the National Gallery of Australia.

² 'Australia's "Blue Poles" – That \$1,300,000 Buy', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 17 October 1973, 8–9.

³ Sarina Noordhuis-Fairfax, 'BLUE POLES: How Pollock Created a Masterpiece', National Gallery of Australia, <https://bluepoles.nga.gov.au/artwork/blue-poles/>.

⁴ 'On "Blue Poles", the Most Controversial Painting in Australian History', *The Economist*, 28 September 2016, <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2016/09/28/on-blue-poles-the-most-controversial-painting-in-australian-history>.

⁵ For detailed discussions of *Blue Poles* and the histories that surround it, refer to Anthony White, ed., *Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2002; Lindsay Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card: Blue Poles and Cultural Politics in the Whitlam Era*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2006; Lucina Ward et al., *American Masters 1940–1980*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2018.

examining this work of art it is impossible to understand it or write about it without adopting a lens of intermedial inquiry. I will return to *Blue Poles* later; however, Pollock's painting is not the key focus of this article. I begin with it because it is a quintessential example of the intersection of art history with other modes of public and popular writing, communication, and historicization. This article will argue that Australian art histories do not need to be as (in)famous as the example of *Blue Poles* to benefit from intermedial approaches to art historiography: *Blue Poles* simply highlights the importance and opportunities for these methodologies.⁶

This article will begin an argument for the importance and benefits of adopting such intermedial methods in Australian art historiography, with particular focus on the intersections between Australian art and popular media histories.⁷ Art historians working in Australia have been highly attuned to the importance of historiographical methodologies for decades. In the opinion of Terry Smith, Australian art historians have been *more* engaged with art historiography than in many other countries, particularly compared with the United States.⁸ Australian art historiographies to date have largely focused on the construction of histories, narratives, and myths by studying established academic art histories and more niche or discipline-specific texts (which target audiences with pre-existing

⁶ The extent to which it represents a familiar *media* presence in the lives of many Australians does make *Blue Poles* more of an exception rather than a rule. There are many paintings equally widely known as cultural icons of Australia, such as Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams* (1890) or George W. Lambert's *A Sergeant of the Light Horse* (1920). Yet few would rival *Blue Poles* as being so highly mediated to Australian audiences through the popular press – William Dobell's Archibald Prize-winning portrait *Mr Joshua Smith* (1943) being a possible exception.

⁷ In many ways, this article and its arguments develop from the legacies and ongoing influence of visual culture studies and its engagements with the visual arts and art history. The pioneering work of W. J. T. Mitchell should be acknowledged here – Mitchell's definition of visual culture as a discipline 'not limited to the study of images or media, but [which] extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing ... less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves' clearly resonates with this project. Mitchell himself acknowledged that 'visual studies stands in an ambiguous relation to art history and aesthetics', in part due to the extremely broad scope of its study of visual artefacts. For this article, the connections between art history and media studies/media histories have been emphasized because of the article's specific topic of enquiry. In this case, media studies and histories help understand and unpack the specificities of magazine publications, including their modes of visual construction and production, their economic drivers, and their defined modes of circulation and reception. I certainly do not intend this investigation to be a call, as Mitchell says, for 'art history [to] fold its tent and, in a new alliance with aesthetics and media studies, aim to build a larger edifice around the concept of visual culture'; however, the position of the 'news media' (as opposed 'popular media' broadly defined) has not largely been at the forefront of the visual culture canon. Mitchell's work, along with sympathetic media/cultural studies scholars such as Raymond Williams and Janet Staiger, remain important references in my ongoing study. W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1:2, 2002, 170, 167, 168.

⁸ Terry Smith, 'Inside Out, Outside In: Changing Perspectives in Australian Art Historiography', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 4, 2011, 1.

knowledge of art). By contrast, relatively little scholarly analysis has considered how the visual arts and art history have been communicated to broad Australian publics through the mainstream media. The example of *Blue Poles* is the exception rather than the rule, because very little detailed analysis has looked into the histories of arts communication across popular media such as radio, television, and magazines, despite the enormous reach and influence that such media forms have had in impacting public opinions and cultural perceptions.⁹

One way to address this gap is to write critical *popular* historiographies of Australian art and art history. Such an approach can evaluate not only how popular media digest and repurpose established art historical analyses, but also how mainstream media can reveal counter narratives to scholarly traditions of art history. This article aims to identify methodological approaches that can be applied to and synthesized with art history methodologies in order to critically understand the popular reception of art in Australia. Popular historiographic methods that draw on disciplines such as public history and media studies, and that analyse broad media forms and texts, can help us understand the complex relations between popular value, reception, and perception of art in Australia. I will analyse some key case studies from mid-to-late-twentieth-century Australian popular magazines – including *Pix* and the *Australian Women's Weekly* – to explore how art and art history have been presented to large general Australian audiences. The article will conclude by unpacking the value of popular historiographic approaches, because they can consider expanded fields of public reception and can engage with current scholarship that is reconsidering the position of spectatorship within art history.¹⁰

Australian art historiographies

Before considering how a new approach towards historiography might work, it is important to understand the legacies and active practices of art historiography in Australia. As mentioned previously, Australian art historians have been deeply engaged with historiographic modes for many decades. Terry Smith's 1983 essay 'Writing the History of Australian Art: Its Past, Present and Possible Future' was a formative contribution to the field.¹¹ Smith's analysis of the state of the discipline revealed the dynamic nature of art history in Australia which, not long after its formal and academic establishment, had already begun to critique its own genesis and orthodoxies. Smith's contribution was closely followed by another key work of art historiography, *The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay About Interpretation* by

⁹ The iconicity of Jackson Pollock is itself testament to the power of the media. Pollock's public persona and its surrounding myths were substantially constructed through mainstream press coverage, including the famed 1949 article in *Life* magazine whose title asked the question: 'Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?'. 'Jackson Pollock: Is he the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?', *Life*, 8 August 1949, 42–45.

¹⁰ Kerr Houston, *The Place of the Viewer: The Embodied Beholder in the History of Art, 1764–1968*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019.

¹¹ Terry Smith, 'Writing the History of Australian Art: Its Past, Present and Possible Future', *Australian Journal of Art*, 3, 1983, 10–29.

Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen, published in 1988.¹² Together, these texts paved the way for sustained consideration of Australian art historiography which, as Jaynie Anderson writes, has subsequently 'flourished locally'.¹³

Some of the reasons for this early and sustained historiographic engagement lie in the particularities of art history's emergence in Australia. Australia's first art history program was established in 1946 in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne; its inaugural three faculty members were of predominantly European and Anglo-Saxon origin, but each with different methodological approaches and historical focuses. The first two faculty members were English-Irish scholar Joseph Burke and Austrian Franz Philipp. Burke was an expert in English art of the eighteenth century and an associate of Kenneth Clark. Philipp was a Renaissance scholar who studied art history at the University of Vienna, and who had a grounding in European approaches of iconographic and iconological immersion.¹⁴ As Anderson writes, both Burke and Philipp 'brought with them methodologies of European art history which were transformed and mutated by the country to which they came', especially as they expanded their fields of study to engage with Australian art.¹⁵

The art history program at the University of Melbourne has been extremely influential and has produced some of the country's most enduringly active art historians. Yet in the discipline's early years there was a certain unevenness in the balance of topics taught. This is especially notable in relation to the position of Australian art and modern art. As Anderson writes, until the 1980s students were only able to work on Australian art topics at the postgraduate level.¹⁶ Undergraduate students of art history during this period were not exposed widely to the art of Australia – not even settler Australian artists, let alone First Nations arts and culture – as the curriculum remained resolutely European in focus. The third member of the inaugural trio of scholars and teachers, Australian-born art historian Bernard Smith, epitomizes some of these imbalances of art historical communication across different cultural spheres and institutions. Smith's legacy and influence on the histories and engrained narratives of Australian art is substantial. His writings such as *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (first published 1945), *Australian Painting* (first published 1962) and *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas* (first published 1960) have proved enduringly influential. As Rex Butler writes, 'All subsequent Australian art history – and, indeed, historiography – can be seen to proceed from [Smith's writings]'.¹⁷

¹² Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen, *The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay about Interpretation*, Sydney: Power Publications, 1988.

¹³ Jaynie Anderson, 'Art Historiography in Australia and New Zealand', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 4, 2011, 1.

¹⁴ Smith, 'Inside Out, Outside In', 2.

¹⁵ Anderson, 'Art Historiography in Australia and New Zealand', 3.

¹⁶ Anderson, 'Art Historiography in Australia and New Zealand', 3.

¹⁷ Rex Butler, *A Secret History of Australian Art*, St Leonards, NSW: Craftsman House Fine Art Publishing, 2002, 102.

Despite Smith's significant writing about art from Australia and the immediate Asia-Pacific region, this engagement did not extend to his early university teaching. As Anderson writes, 'Strangely for an art historian who is famous for his original contributions to Australian art, Smith's syllabus in Melbourne was just about European art, never Australian'.¹⁸ Therefore, in the early decades of art history in Australia, Australian art was largely absent from university teaching of the discipline. The study of modern and contemporary art in general was also a something of a lacuna within syllabuses of the time, at least until another important institutional development in Australian art history: the establishment of the Power Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Sydney in 1968. Founded through a bequest by artist and philanthropist Dr John Joseph Wardell Power, the Power Institute's mission had an avowedly contemporary outlook.¹⁹ Bernard Smith left the University of Melbourne to become the inaugural Power Professor of Contemporary Art and Director of the Power Institute. It was not until the formation of the Power Institute that Australia's first department of twentieth-century art was established.²⁰ Terry Smith adds, however, that even within this more modern and contemporary orientation, Australian art still did not feature prominently in the early curriculum.²¹

Within the academy, the study and teaching of Australian art was relatively under-emphasized for many years. The parallel influence of books such as Bernard Smith's – as well as the earlier dominant history of Australian art, William Moore's *The Story of Australian Art* (1934) – constructed persistent narratives around Australian art history. The subsequent uptake of historiographic methods and approaches was spurred by critical re-evaluations of these texts and their narratives. Burn et al. stated their clear priority was to 'reassess what has been valued in the standard texts on art in Australia',²² while for Terry Smith the dominant Australian art publications up until the early 1980s had 'come to constitute an orthodoxy – complex, many-sided and divided as to cultural level, but nonetheless an orthodoxy which has recently seemed to be more closed than open to different perspectives, new possibilities'.²³ Therefore, the growth of Australian art historiographies – of which Terry Smith, Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen were at the forefront – responded to the dominance of such art historical texts and their (sometimes uneven) relationship to academic institutions. From the 1980s onwards, a broad range of Australian art historiographic studies have expanded this 'canon' to provide detailed studies of the influences of other key writers, publishers and

¹⁸ Anderson, 'Art Historiography in Australia and New Zealand', 3.

¹⁹ The Power bequest states its goals as '[making] available to the people of Australia the latest ideas and theories in plastic arts by means of lectures and teaching and by the purchase of the most recent contemporary art of the world ... so as to bring the people of Australia in more direct touch with the latest art developments in other countries'.

<http://www.powerpublications.com.au/about/>.

²⁰ Anderson, 'Art Historiography in Australia and New Zealand', 3.

²¹ Smith, 'Inside Out, Outside In', 2.

²² Burn et al., *The Necessity of Australian Art*, 4.

²³ Smith, 'Writing the History of Australian Art', 10.

communicators of Australian art.²⁴ Despite this broadening of scope, most of these historiographies and analyses still remain focused on what could be thought of as 'art specialist' texts; that is, books, journals and publications that are explicitly qualified as 'art' texts or are more implicitly targeted towards audiences with pre-existing knowledge of the visual arts and art history.

In his 1983 article, Terry Smith identified the need to negotiate the 'contending sites' of the 'popular' and the 'elite', citing examples such as commercial art books, popular magazines and tabloid newspapers as important sites of meaning-making requiring further analysis.²⁵ Relatively few Australian art historians, however, have taken up the task of considering how art and art history have been communicated through such popular and populist media. Yet if we are to truly understand and critique the role that art history has played 'in elucidating ... not simply an approach, but attitudes of mind and systems of value in Australian art',²⁶ we need to more fully understand how those histories have been communicated, transmitted and reshaped for wider audiences outside the spheres of formal academia or art specialist publications. It could even be argued that these under-considered relations have in fact been implicit within the history of Australian art history; the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne was in fact established through an endowment from the popular newspaper the *Herald and Weekly Times*, through its chairman Keith Murdoch.²⁷ The remainder of this article will be dedicated to arguing for the benefits of such an approach of popular historiography as well as identifying and analysing key case studies that demonstrate some of the spheres in which broader discourses, narratives, and debates around art in Australia were also being formed and fermented.

Popular historiographies: approaches, methodologies, benefits

Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition* was published in 1945 by the influential Sydney publisher Sydney Ure Smith. At the time of its publication it was widely reviewed and covered in local newspapers and arts periodicals, reflecting the density of art reviewing that was present in the popular media during the post-war

²⁴ See, for example, Nancy Underhill, *Making Australian Art 1916–49: Sydney Ure Smith Patron and Publisher*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991; Joanna Mendelsohn, *Letters & Liars: Norman Lindsay and the Lindsay Family*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1996; Joan Kerr and Jo Holder, eds, *Past Present: The National Women's Art Anthology*, North Ryde, NSW: Craftsman House, 1999; Helen Hughes and Nicholas Croggon, eds, *Impresario: Paul Taylor, the Melbourne Years, 1980–1984*, Melbourne: Surplus, 2013; Jaynie Anderson, Christopher R. Marshall and Andrew Yip, eds, *The Legacies of Bernard Smith: Essays on Australian Art, History and Cultural Politics*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2016; Daniel Thomas, *Recent Past: Writing Australian Art*, edited by Hannah Fink and Steven Miller, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2020.

²⁵ Smith, 'Writing the History of Australian Art', 27.

²⁶ Burn et al., *The Necessity of Australian Art*, 7.

²⁷ At the time Murdoch was also President of the Council of Trustees at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and had been persuaded to contribute the funding by Daryl Lindsay, Director of the NGV. Jaynie Anderson, 'Art History's History in Melbourne: Franz Philipp in Correspondence with Arthur Boyd', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 1:2, 2000, 111–2.

period.²⁸ Smith's book also spurred widespread cultural debates. Artist Albert Tucker, for example, famously took issue with Smith's Marxist materialist-informed analysis in the inaugural issue of the *Angry Penguins Broadsheet*, which prompted further critical debates and responses by artists like Noel Counihan and Smith himself. *Place, Taste and Tradition* also featured in broader debates in the Australian press about the overall state of criticism in the 1940s; on 9 October 1945, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on an address given by John Metcalfe, Chief Librarian of the Sydney Public Library, to the members of the Australian Book Society. Metcalfe lamented what he considered the overall poor standard of cultural criticism in Australia. He singled out the *Herald's* own review of Smith's book as being particularly unsympathetic and ill-considered, arguing that the reviewer was 'known to be definitely unsympathetic towards Australian artists and their work. The "'Herald's" action in giving that particular book to that particular reviewer was like throwing a cat to a greyhound'.²⁹ In the wake of his book's publication, Smith gave numerous public lectures, including at the Marx School Hall and the Studio of Realist Art (both in Sydney) and the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts in Melbourne. Smith was, at the time, working as an education officer at the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, and was therefore an experienced arts communicator.³⁰ These examples are a small selection that reveal how Smith's book was being discussed, analysed, and debated widely in the public sphere upon its release.

Broadsheet newspapers, artistic literary journals, and public lectures are spheres of media and public communication that can be seen to 'cultivate' informed knowledge of the important news and issues of the day. They are precisely the forums in which one would expect to find this type of engagement with and critique of a work such as *Place, Taste and Tradition*. Yet, the promotion and dissemination of ideas from and about this type of cultural content was not limited to intellectual, specialist or so-called 'serious' media formats. There is evidence to suggest that supposedly 'lowbrow' media publications of the time were also including coverage and communication of this type of arts content. While Australian art history has overlooked these publications, their engagement with the visual arts should not be wholly surprising, particularly given the strong histories of working-class engagement with the arts in Australia. This ranges from art classes at the nineteenth-century network of Mechanics' Institutes, through to the Art and Working Life program, funded by the Australia Council for the Arts, which aimed

²⁸ This includes reviews and coverage in *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, 4 August 1945), *The Age* (Melbourne, 4 August 1945), *The Argus* (Melbourne, 11 August 1945), *The Advertiser* (Adelaide, 11 August 1945), *The Sun* (Sydney, 19 August 1945), *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane, 25 August 1945), *The West Australian* (Perth, 1 September 1945) and *The Mercury* (Hobart, 15 September 1945), to list just a few.

²⁹ 'Book Reviewing Criticised', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 October 1945, 4.

³⁰ Jaynie Anderson, 'Biographical Overview', in *The Legacies of Bernard Smith: Essays on Australian Art, History and Cultural Politics*, edited by Jaynie Anderson, Christopher R. Marshall and Andrew Yip, Sydney: Power Publications, 2016, (5–21) 6–7.

to 'encourage the development of opportunities for workers and their families to gain access to the arts'.³¹

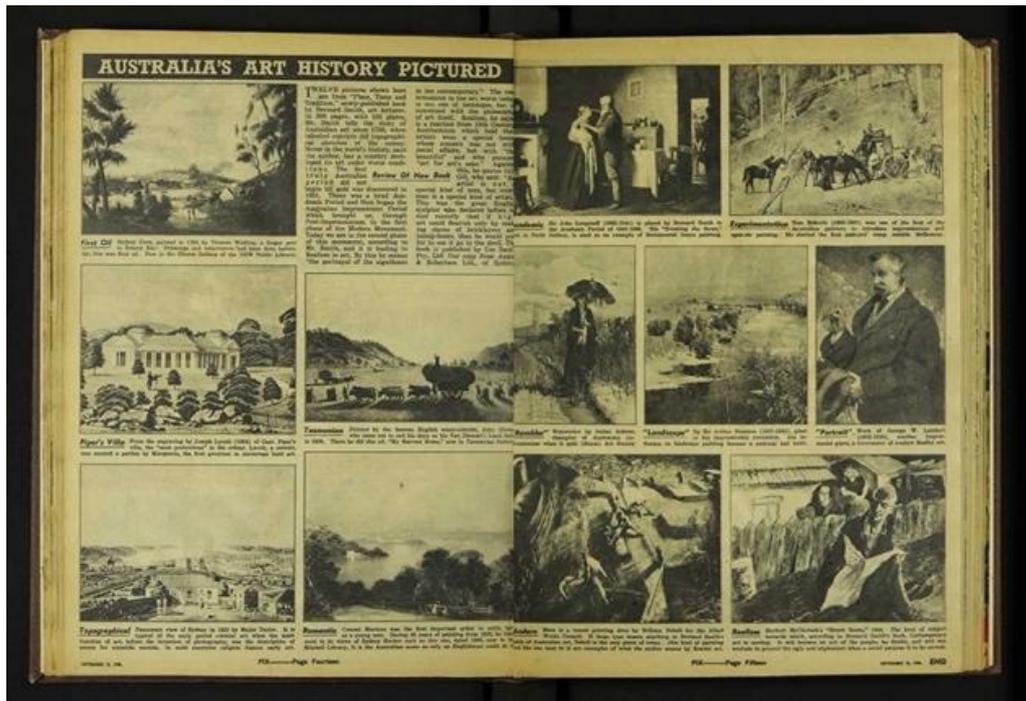


Figure 1 'Australia's Art History Pictured', *Pix*, 15 September 1945, 14–15, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-466804145>.

Image source: Trove, National Library of Australia.

One illuminating example can be found in the popular Australian tabloid magazine *Pix*, which ran in Australia from 1938 until 1972, when it merged with another similar title, *People*. As its name suggests, *Pix* was primarily an image-based publication: it ran heavily illustrated stories that combined a 'mix of scandal, sensationalism, human-interest stories, fashion, politics, culture and entertainment'.³² Certain elements of its content were characteristic of the tabloid press, including celebrity cover girls and attention-grabbing headlines. Yet, the magazine does not appear to have seen its role as simply offering scandal, titillation, or idle entertainment, but also offering stories and content that actively increased the general knowledge of its readers.³³ On 15 September 1945, *Pix* included an article titled 'Australia's Art History Pictured', in which it reviewed and promoted the newly published *Place, Taste and Tradition* to its audience (fig. 1). In a two-page

³¹ National Library of Australia, 'Art and Working Life', <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/6493090>. See also Sandy Kirby and Ian Burn, *Artists and Unions: A Critical Tradition: A Report on the Art & Working Life Program*, Redfern, NSW: Australia Council, 1992.

³² State Library of New South Wales, 'The Popular Tabloid *Pix* Magazine Now Online!', 8 November 2017, <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/blogs/popular-tabloid-pix-magazine-now-online>.

³³ For example, the magazine would include sections such as the 'Pix Quiz' and 'Check What You Learned' that reinforced facts from its articles and general knowledge – ending in the assertion, 'There's KNOWLEDGE in PIX – Every Week'. *Pix*, 19 September 1942, 34.

illustrated spread, the article features a brief review of Smith's arguments, along with twelve black and white reproductions of key artworks that correspond to important movements, milestones or genres of Australian art featured in Smith's analysis. Readers were shown examples of early convict artists such as Thomas Watling and Joseph Lycett, well-known Australian Impressionist painters such as Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, and present-day active artists including William Dobell. Each artwork reproduction (mainly paintings, except for one aquatint print) is accompanied with a relatively detailed caption that gives further information about the work and its significance in Australian art history. The substantive text of the article is short; consistent with the magazine's house style, it is the pictures that have the most focus and space afforded to them. The article does quote and summarize key points and arguments of the book, stating that in Smith's view, the 'real revolution in the art world today is not one of technique, but is concerned with the philosophy of art itself'.³⁴

The *Pix* article calls itself a 'Review of [a] New Book', but by today's standards it would be considered less of a review and more of a concise summary. It is a characteristic example of how the voice and writing tones of magazines of this era were often constructed in an informative and educative mode rather than in the style of criticism and review.³⁵ As a piece of writing, this article does not tell us very much about *Place, Taste and Tradition* that we cannot glean from reading the book itself. It has no by-line – which was not unusual during this period – and it does not offer much in the way of independent or novel interpretations of Smith's book. For a historical researcher who might be seeking to find different or under-considered responses to Smith's text, on the surface this article does not seem to offer much of value or significance.³⁶ But, it would be a mistake to draw such a conclusion: the historical interest of this article is not in what it reveals about its content but rather what it reveals about its frame and its broader contexts, including the magazine's editorial choices and preferences and the audiences in which it would have circulated and have been read. Popular magazines cultivate and address their audiences very consciously, and therefore any article within a magazine like *Pix* must be read as always already situated within its readership. The editors of *Pix* would have made a conscious choice that this book and the artwork reproductions that accompanied its article were important for its audiences to know about. They thus consign a sense of value to Australian art to be appreciated not just by the educated elite or 'literati' but by wide Australian publics, providing entry points for communicating why these texts and art histories are of broad cultural value.

³⁴ 'Australia's Art History Pictured', *Pix*, 15 September 1945, 14–15.

³⁵ Influential former editor of the *Australian Women's Weekly* Ita Buttrose confirmed this approach in relation to the magazine, observing that 'it was the role that *The Weekly* played. It was all things to all people and it had an educational role. Its information was educational, apart from what's happening in the world'. Interview with the author, 9 October 2019.

³⁶ This feeds into a broader consensus that Australian media histories, and popular media histories in particular, have been largely under-explored. Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'Inaugural KS Inglis Address: Making Australian Media History', *Media International Australia* 170:1, 2019, 12–13.

The value of a text such as the *Pix* review lies in its wider popular context and situatedness within the media. An example like this raises vital questions about the position and function of popular media texts when writing art historiographies. Terry Smith's observation that in Australian art history there is a pressing need to consider 'how [texts] construct their histories'³⁷ remains true today, and there is a broad need to understand how those histories, narratives, and values are transmitted to and received by wide audiences. While some attempts have been made in Australian art history to recognize and analyse the relationships between popular culture and art,³⁸ overall the place of art in the popular press has not been thoroughly explored or documented. This gap offers vital opportunities for Australian art history to both expand its established scopes of exploration, and to integrate new intermedial methodologies that have been established in international (art) historical studies.

Significant scholarship has been undertaken in this area in America and Europe, including multiple and diverse studies of American magazines such as *Life* and *Time* and their engagement with the arts³⁹ as well as detailed studies of the histories of arts television in the United Kingdom.⁴⁰ Historians in Europe – and in Germany in particular – have been at the forefront of establishing methodologies of popular historiography that seek to develop an “expanded history of historiography” and a new reflection on historiography and the public'.⁴¹ Moves towards popular historiography are, in part, reactions against a view that traditional historiography has become increasingly '[incomprehensible] by non-specialists [due to] its ever-intensified specialization'.⁴² For historians such as Sylvia Paletschek this is a problem, because in becoming increasingly specialized, historiography can lose its capacity and motivation to critically consider issues about the writing of history outside its specialized topic and audience. Paletschek argues that popular historiography, through its focus on analysing the mediating strategies of popular

³⁷ Smith, 'Writing the History of Australian Art', 10.

³⁸ Some examples that have contributed to this interest include Ann Stephen, Philip Goad, and Andrew McNamara, *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia*, Carlton, VIC; London: Miegunyah Press in association with Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney, 2008; Chris McAuliffe, *Art and Suburbia*, Roseville East, NSW: Craftsman House, 1996; Joanna Mendelsohn, Alison Inglis, Catherine De Lorenzo and Catherine Speck, *Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening Our Eyes*, Port Melbourne, Victoria: Thames & Hudson, 2018, as well as the broad outputs of art historian Joan Kerr.

³⁹ See, for example, Bradford R. Collins, 'Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948–51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise', *The Art Bulletin*, 73:2, 1991, 283–308; David Company, *Walker Evans: The Magazine Work*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2014; Erika Lee Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001; Melissa Renn, 'Within Their Walls: LIFE Magazine's "Illuminations"', *Archives of American Art Journal*, 53:1/2, 2014, 30–51.

⁴⁰ John A. Walker, *Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain*, London: J. Libbey, 1993; John Wyver, *Vision On: Film, Television and the Arts in Britain*, London: Wallflower, 2007.

⁴¹ Sylvia Paletschek, 'Introduction: Why Analyse Popular Historiographies?', in *Popular Historiographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Cultural Meanings, Social Practices*, edited by Sylvia Paletschek, Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 2011, (1–18) 9

⁴² Paletschek, 'Introduction', 3.

media, can 'provide stimulation to its academic sibling [academic historiography]; for example, where it picks up marginal or innovative issues or makes use of new methods, sources and representational forms'.⁴³

Some common applications of popular historiography include studying how historical events are depicted through popular media such as film, television, or radio. Popular historiography has important conceptual links to areas such as popular history and memory studies, meaning that studies of popular historical revivals and re-enactments also fall within its purview. What characterizes these approaches is that the historical and critical analysis is not directed exclusively to the text or topic at hand – it is equally interested in what popular media formats can reveal about the societies that produce and consume them. Historian Franz-Josef Brüggemeier makes this point in an article ostensibly about the history of West Germany winning the 1954 Football World Cup when he writes:

The title of this chapter implies that what follows will be an article about football. ... However, the chapter will deal only briefly with football Instead, it will deal with how Germans reacted to their team winning the World Cup, and what their reactions tell us about German society and the German nation in the early 1950s, just ten years after the war.⁴⁴

There are timely and targeted opportunities to apply the methodological groundings of popular historiography to art history, both in Australia and internationally. As Michaela Marek and Eva Pluhařová-Grigienė write, while 'the study of popular art histories has lately enjoyed increasing attention, it is lacking ... comprehensive and comparative analyses'.⁴⁵ Popular historiography situates itself in an expanded field of audiences and public reception, helping to understand more about how broad cultural values develop and evolve in a society over time and in response to dominant media forms. I will next apply this methodological grounding to expand the critical possibilities for art historiography in Australia.

Case study: the *Australian Women's Weekly's* teen magazine supplements

There are many forms and elements of the media that combine to create spheres of the popular press. Different media forms have variable levels of dominance and influence across time, and the early-to-mid twentieth century saw media like radio, cinema, and television all emerge and consolidate influence at particular times and places. For this article, however, my focus will be on popular magazines of the mid-twentieth century in Australia. These were usually weekly publications, but also

⁴³ Paletschek, 'Introduction', 5.

⁴⁴ Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, 'Das Wunder von Bern: The 1954 Football World Cup, the German Nation and Popular Histories', in *Popular Historiographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Cultural Meanings, Social Practices*, edited by Sylvia Paletschek, Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 2011, 188.

⁴⁵ Michaela Marek and Eva Pluhařová-Grigienė, 'Baroque for a Wide Public: Popular Media and Their Constructions of the Epoch on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 15, 2016, 2.

included monthly periodicals; some were attached to or associated with major daily newspapers but others were independent ventures.

Magazines are particularly important and generative for this research for a number of reasons. In his sketch of an 'institutional history' of magazines, David Carter distils a number of key research questions into the following core question: 'What was it that the magazines did that nothing else in the culture did?'⁴⁶ Along with 'what they did' is the question of 'how they did it', and this is linked to many of their formal and material qualities. Magazines involve seriality, meaning they can generate regular audience engagement through serial stories, multi-part series, and regular features and columns. This leads to the important temporality of magazines: they not only mark a regularity of time through their publication schedules, but readers use them to carve out their own temporal spaces (weekend reading, passing the time in a waiting room, on the daily commute). As Carter writes, 'Different temporalities inscribe different relations to the everyday, the commercial, the private or public spheres – their temporality is crucial to how magazines address us in our private or public beings'.⁴⁷ Magazines' materiality was also key to nurturing their engagement with their readers. Today in the age of mass digitization and online publishing, the materiality of physical publications is being re-examined and (sometimes problematically) newly reified. Before the internet, physical publication was a necessity not a novelty, but that is not to say that magazines were not deeply conscious of their physical presence and material quality. Magazines competed for state-of-the-art printing technologies, and they promoted themselves to readers through their growing use of colour, new layouts and binding decisions. As my case study of the *Australian Women's Weekly* shows, magazines also encouraged their readers to intervene in their physicality in order to solidify levels and modes of engagement. Finally, while magazines' seriality addresses their viewers on individual levels, they were also highly effective in creating broader communities of readers – they were the social networks of their day.

This section considers one case study from Australia's most popular and well-known magazine, the *Australian Women's Weekly*, that demonstrates how many of these key elements were activated in order to transmit defined meanings and values. Even today, the *Australian Women's Weekly* is a cultural staple of Australian social life, albeit with less impact and influence than it had in its heyday. The magazine was the brainchild of journalist George Warnecke, who had conceived of a new formula for a magazine that unashamedly treated 'women's issues' as news. Previously, women's magazines in Australia had often been side projects or derivatives of established publications,⁴⁸ with content viewed (rather patronisingly)

⁴⁶ David Carter, 'Magazine History', *Media International Australia*, 99:1, 2001, 9.

⁴⁷ Carter, 'Magazine History', 11.

⁴⁸ Such as the *Australian Woman's Mirror*, founded in 1924 as an offshoot of the popular news magazine *The Bulletin*. Warnecke had this explicitly in mind when conceiving of his new publication, writing that he wanted to 'Start if Big, not as a sideline of a daily'. Warnecke, quoted in Denis O'Brien, *The Weekly: A Lively and Nostalgic Celebration of Australia through 50 Years of Its Most Popular Magazine*, Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1982, 14.

as 'isolated novelty topics'.⁴⁹ The *Australian Women's Weekly* was different – it was as much a newspaper as a magazine and Warnecke stated his vision for it along these lines: 'Above all, whether the journalists are writing about fashion, cookery, baby care or diet, there has to be an element of news in what they write'.⁵⁰ Warnecke took his pitch to publisher Frank Packer – along with Packer's financial partner (and former politician) Edward Granville 'Ted' Theodore. Despite some initial hesitancy from Packer, he eventually agreed and partnered with Warnecke to launch the *Australian Women's Weekly* in 1933. The magazine was an immediate success and with its new formula it was:

distinguished from its rivals by its particular combination of high production values and news reporting, the social and fashion notes characteristic of glossy women's magazines, and the usual fare of their humbler counterparts – celebrities, fiction and domestic matters. In this way, and because it maintained a low cover-price, it spanned the class affiliations of the largest possible number of Australian women and their families.⁵¹

Unlike other women's magazines, it included news stories that were not exclusively 'feminine',⁵² and although it was targeted towards women it always maintained a strong male readership as well.⁵³ Even though its visions of femininity were frequently focused around domesticity and motherhood, as historian Susan Sheridan argues, the magazine nonetheless 'gave Australian women a redefinition of Australianness that included them in it'.⁵⁴

At its peak from the 1950s to 1970s the *Australian Women's Weekly* 'was read in one in four Australian homes and had the biggest circulation per head of population of any women's magazine in the world'.⁵⁵ Along with its large formal sales figures and circulation, it was a staple magazine of doctors' waiting rooms, hair salons and other social 'transit spaces', meaning its 'pass-along rate' would have further increased its readership and broad engagement with the Australian public. As its position as a national institution grew, the magazine was profoundly influential in constructing and presenting ideas of the 'Australian way of life' to its vast audiences, particularly in the post-war society where it 'represented everyday Australia to itself during the years of radical social change'.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Vane Lindesay, *The Way We Were: Australian Popular Magazines 1856–1969*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983, 135.

⁵⁰ Warnecke, quoted in O'Brien, *The Weekly*, 14.

⁵¹ Susan Sheridan, *Who Was That Woman?: The Australian Women's Weekly in the Postwar Years*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002, 3.

⁵² Sheridan, *Who Was That Woman?*, 1.

⁵³ Lindesay, *The Way We Were*, 135.

⁵⁴ Sheridan, *Who Was That Woman?*, 4.

⁵⁵ Sheridan, *Who Was That Woman?*, 1. The magazine would list its circulation numbers proudly on its covers at its peak, which rose from 700,000 copies per week in 1950 to over 830,000 copies every week in 1967.

⁵⁶ Sheridan, *Who Was That Woman?*, 3.

The *Australian Women's Weekly's* social influence was due, in part, to a level of trust it had earned from the Australian public, and a confidence that the type of content it published during this key post-war period was of interest and importance to its readers.⁵⁷ The magazine's editor of the post-war period was Esmé Fenston, its longest-serving editor who worked in the role from 1950 until her death in 1972. Fenston was known for her astuteness in reading the moods and interests of her large readership. Ita Buttrose, another important editor of the *Australian Women's Weekly*, observes that when people asked Fenston how the magazine chose its articles, Fenston would answer along the following lines: 'We tell ourselves that if we're interested in it, then other people will be too', adding that Fenston 'read the feelings of the Australian people really well'.⁵⁸ Fenston's tenure coincided with a marked increase in the breadth and variety of arts coverage in the magazine, which had always been a core element since its establishment in the 1930s but had decreased during the 1940s and immediate post-war years.⁵⁹ Therefore, the presence of broad coverage of and engagement with the visual arts within the magazine is a clear indication that the editors saw the arts as an important, vital element of Australian culture that broad Australian audiences should have knowledge of and engage with.⁶⁰

The *Australian Women's Weekly* appears to have had multiple motivations for writing about and covering the arts and, like the magazine itself, these motivations can at times seem contrary and disparate. For example, art gallery openings and cultural events were perfect content for the magazine's important social pages, feeding a sense of social and material aspirationalism that the magazine promoted. In addition to this, the magazine also saw its role to materially support, promote and advocate for contemporary Australian artists, as their prestigious but short-lived Art Prize in the 1950s demonstrates.⁶¹ Finally, the magazine also clearly saw itself as having an educative function for its readers. Buttrose describes the magazine as being 'all things to all people and it had an educational role'.⁶² It is this final motivation that informs the following case study.

In the early 1950s, the *Australian Women's Weekly* began to integrate content that specifically addressed its teenage readership. As Kirra Minton writes, this was a period 'when Australian teenagers were beginning to emerge as their own distinct social and consumer group'.⁶³ Through Fenston's leadership, the *Australian Women's Weekly* sought to capitalize on this growing consumer power. In 1952, the magazine introduced a column called 'Youth Sums Up' and by 1954, this had transformed into a monthly lift-out, which was essentially Australia's first ever national teenage

⁵⁷ Buttrose describes the magazine as occupying 'an amazing position of trust in Australia'. Ita Buttrose, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.

⁵⁸ Ita Buttrose, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.

⁵⁹ O'Brien, *The Weekly*, 114.

⁶⁰ Buttrose confirms that the arts were seen as an important element of the magazine's editorial. Ita Buttrose, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.

⁶¹ Kate Warren, 'A Brief History of *The Australian Women's Weekly* Art Prize, 1955–1959', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 18:2, 2018, 242–58.

⁶² Ita Buttrose, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.

⁶³ Kirra Minton, 'How to Be a Girl: Consumerism Meets Guidance in the *Australian Women's Weekly's* Teen Segments, 1952–1959', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 41:1, 2017, 3.

magazine. By 1959, this had become a weekly lift-out called *Teenagers' Weekly*, which often focused on topics such as dating advice, dealing with one's parents, popular celebrities of the day, and encouraging girls to explore and pursue broad study and work options.⁶⁴ Within this mix were regular sections that encouraged its readers to engage broadly with arts and culture. An article from 1959, titled 'Do You Want to be Well Read?' is an early example that epitomizes the magazine's approach to presenting arts and culture for its readers.⁶⁵ With an educative but not explicitly pedagogical function, this type of article aimed to demystify and provide broad overviews of iconic and canonical examples of arts and culture, in this case Western literature.



Figure 2 Douglas Watson, 'Beginning... ART Through the Ages', *Australian Women's Weekly (Teenagers' Weekly Supplement)*, 18 October 1961, 3, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/5529409>. Credit: Are Media Pty Limited / aremediasyndication.com.au / 'The Australian Women's Weekly'. Image source: Trove, National Library of Australia.

What began as slightly ad hoc segments and articles devoted to arts and culture became formalized and regularized over time. Between 1961 and 1962, the magazine published a twenty-three-part series on the history of art titled 'Art

⁶⁴ It is also important to note that while the teen supplements were primarily aimed at teenage girls, they were not gender exclusive, and the magazine tried to appeal to both male and female readerships. For example, in 1959 it ran an 'ideal date' contest where readers were invited to submit responses about what qualities they liked on a date, to win £20. The resulting article, published on 9 December 1959, includes responses from both teenage girls and boys.

⁶⁵ Ross Campbell, 'Do You Want to be Well Read? 12 Books Worth Getting to Know', *Australian Women's Weekly (Teenagers' Weekly Supplement)*, 14 October 1959, 13.

Through the Ages',⁶⁶ which began with Byzantine art, ended with Abstract Expressionism, and spanned a wide breadth of early Modern to Avant-Garde Western art practices (fig. 2). Written by artist and educator Douglas Watson,⁶⁷ this was succeeded by a seventeen-part series on 'Australian Painters'. The series begins with convict artist Joseph Lycett (fig. 3), ends with Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira, and includes texts that cover colonial Australian artists and Australian Impressionism as well as the growing influence of expressionism and abstraction.⁶⁸ Each article is presented in a standardized format, reproducing one key artwork in colour and including between 250 to 350 words of text. The articles introduce the core elements and characteristics of the artistic movement or era, contextualize the movement, and touch on key materials, techniques and moments of focused visual analysis. The 'Australian Painters' series is focused on individual artists and also incorporates key points of biography.



Figure 3 Douglas Watson, 'Convict's Art Won Pardon', *Australian Women's Weekly (Teenagers' Weekly Supplement)*, 21 March 1962, 10, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article51602638>. Credit: Are Media Pty Limited / aremediasyndication.com.au / 'The Australian Women's Weekly'. Image source: Trove, National Library of Australia.

⁶⁶ Possibly a cheeky 'borrowing' from *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, first published in 1926 and authored by art historian Helen Gardner.

⁶⁷ Alongside his art practice, Watson was an art teacher with the New South Wales Department of Education from the 1950s. He was also involved in training teachers, lecturing in art at the Alexander Mackie Teachers' College in Sydney from 1966. 'Douglas Watson interviewed by Hazel de Berg', Hazel de Berg oral history collection, National Library of Australia, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-214286702/listen>; 'Edward Albert Douglas Watson', *Australian and New Zealand Art Sales Digest*, <https://www.aasd.com.au/artist/3766-edward-albert-douglas-watson/>.

⁶⁸ These series on the visual arts were then followed by similarly presented series on 'Architecture through the Ages', which travelled from Egyptian to Neo Gothic, and 'Architecture in Australia', which covered a more modern spread of architecture from Francis Greenway to Harry Seidler and beyond. Both series were written by architect and historian Morton Herman.

The texts, although short, are informative and engaging, and they demonstrate the underappreciated skill of communicating rich histories and complex concepts clearly, concisely, and effectively. Watson explains terms for his young readers, but he does not excessively simplify them. For example, he writes of Jackson Pollock that his 'calligraphy moves with great and continuous energy, circulating round and round as if effected by the wind or water. On many of these canvases he worked over and over again, producing a patina of line and impasto (thick paint) until all the imagery disappeared'.⁶⁹ Watson evocatively communicates Michael Kmit's influences and technique as such: 'The most dominant influence on his work has been Byzantine ... He paints as if he were laying a mosaic – small shapes of vibrating color, one contrasting with the other, almost a jig-saw in its involved technique'.⁷⁰ The articles clearly build their readers' knowledge of art historical terms and movements across the series, and they demonstrate focused examples of artwork interpretation and visual analysis.

What is also significant about these series is that they were not intended to be transient engagements with art. The *Australian Women's Weekly* printed the articles at standardized sizes purposefully and actively suggested to their readers that they 'cut out the article on each period and neatly paste it into a book'.⁷¹ There is a clear intent here: to spark lasting interest and engagement with the arts and to integrate this with personal and cultural development, in part through this practice of 'scrapbooking' images from the magazine. Media historian Katie Day Good has argued that a key function of scrapbooking was the 'enablement of expressions of taste, which can potentially translate into real-life gains in cultural capital'.⁷² Good contends that despite their presumed private format, scrapbooks 'were created not simply for safe-keeping or posterity, but also for the more immediate task of being shown socially and/or helping the owner achieve distinction'.⁷³ Teens who collected these articles of art history might have combined them with their own sketches or broader hobbies, integrating these pieces of accessible arts education into their own narratives of personal and cultural development and their developing subjective, critical faculties. The materiality of the magazine is transformed and extended, becoming potentially integrated into a personal object of ongoing knowledge transfer and meaning-making.

It appears that these series were popular at the time. On the third anniversary of *Teenagers' Weekly's* establishment, the magazine ran an article outlining some of the engagement they had received from their readers. They make a particular point of highlighting the popularity of their art series, using this to dispel certain perceptions about the younger generation. They write:

⁶⁹ Douglas Watson, 'American Created Unconventional Style: 23. Abstract Expressionism (20th Century)', *Australian Women's Weekly (Teenagers' Weekly Supplement)*, 14 March 1962, 10. Pollock's surname is unfortunately misspelled as 'Pollack' in the article.

⁷⁰ Douglas Watson, 'Mosaics in Paint: 14. Michael Kmit (1910–)', *Australian Women's Weekly (Teenagers' Weekly Supplement)*, 20 June 1962, 8.

⁷¹ 'Beginning... Art Through the Ages', *Australian Women's Weekly (Teenagers' Weekly Supplement)*, 18 October 1961, 3.

⁷² Katie Day Good, 'From Scrapbook to Facebook: A History of Personal Media Assemblage and Archives', *New Media & Society*, 15:4, 2013, 566.

⁷³ Good, 'From Scrapbook to Facebook', 567.

Teenagers are not generally a frivolous, thoughtless crowd. We've received hundreds of letters praising our Art through the Ages, Australian Painters and Lifetime Reading Plan series and asking for more articles on similar themes. In fact, there has been such an overwhelming demand from teenagers for the art series that we've run out of back copies!⁷⁴

There are international precedents to suggest that these types of art history series in magazines were indeed very popular with mainstream audiences of the mid-twentieth century. One seminal international example is *Life* magazine and its early features on art. As Melissa Renn documents, *Life's* ten-part feature on the history of Western civilisation and culture in 1947 and its special issue focused on the Sistine Chapel in 1949 were exceptionally popular, with the latter selling out the entire issue.⁷⁵ As popular and successful as it was, the *Australian Women's Weekly* had nowhere near the resources of a behemoth such as *Life*, but it demonstrates similar motivations of its editors to present art history in an accessible manner, and also of its readers to consume such content.



Figure 4 Douglas Watson, 'Mosaics in Paint', *Australian Women's Weekly* (*Teenagers' Weekly Supplement*), 20 June 1962, 8, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article58588060>. Credit: Are Media Pty Limited / aremediasyndication.com.au / 'The Australian Women's Weekly'. Image source: Trove, National Library of Australia.

Thinking back to the earlier discussion of the history of art history teaching in Australia, perhaps this is not entirely surprising. While the *Australian Women's Weekly's* 'Art Through the Ages' series is rather conventional in its approach and content, the 'Australian Painters' series is more significant as an example that actively introduced large audiences to the work and importance of Australian artists, both historical and contemporary. Some artists who featured in it, such as Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, would likely have already been household names.

⁷⁴ 'Now We Are Three', *Australian Women's Weekly* (*Teenagers' Weekly Supplement*), 13 June 1962, 5.

⁷⁵ Renn, 'Within Their Walls', 37–8.

Contemporary artists such as William Dobell and Albert Namatjira had gained fame through prior controversies and extended press coverage, but other contemporaries such as Jon Molvig or Michael Kmit would have been less known to readers (fig. 4). On a modest level, this series enacts its own form of historicization of Australian art, in parallel to some of the established and now dominant institutional art histories and, crucially, in contrast to the general lack of formalized discussion of Australian art at universities. And while the series was aimed at teenagers, it is likely that many adults would have read it too.⁷⁶

The series also has significant blind spots that need to be critiqued and acknowledged. It is not without a great deal of irony that these series, published in a magazine that worked hard to '[construct] a female-centred world for its readers',⁷⁷ was written by a man and featured no female artists. Albert Namatjira is the only First Nations artist profiled, and there were no artists of non-Anglo or non-European origin included. Given that the *Australian Women's Weekly* consistently profiled women's achievements and employed women journalists, this might be viewed as surprising; however, it is also reflective of broader structural biases present in the Australian arts and intellectual communities at the time. As Juliette Peers has noted, a number of women artists and writers had been highly influential and visible as drivers of early art historical communication in Australia in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.⁷⁸ Yet, in the post-war period, 'the picture changes; women were relatively invisible in the post-war expansion of the art critical and curatorial system in Australia'.⁷⁹ In this context, the *Australian Women's Weekly* supplements are slightly hybrid and conflicted texts; they repeat this 'masculinization' of art history in Australia, while at the same time aiming to replicate prior models of communication of art history and visual culture outside of university or tertiary institutions, often with female audiences in mind.⁸⁰

It would be too simplistic to conflate these two spheres – tertiary education and popular media – as equivalent engagements with art history; however, there are some crossovers in their motivations. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the proportion of Australian women accessing university education was still much lower than men, but it was significantly increasing, with enrolment numbers of women in bachelor degrees quadrupling over this time.⁸¹ This sense of an increasingly educated

⁷⁶ Kirra Minton also makes the point that the *Australian Women's Weekly's* original teen segments were often targeted explicitly towards parents as well, promoting them as ways for parents to 'discover just what thoughts are occupying their sons' and daughters' minds'. Minton, 'How to be a Girl', 7.

⁷⁷ Sheridan, *Who Was That Woman?*, 1.

⁷⁸ Including but not limited to Violet Teague, Margaret Baskerville, Mary Cecil Allen, Margaret Preston, Stephanie Taylor, and Vida Lahey.

⁷⁹ Juliette Peers, 'Women Artists as Drivers of Early Art Historical Activities and Alternative Art Historical Narratives in Australia', *Journal of Art Historiography* 4, 2011, 16.

⁸⁰ Peers highlights the work of Stephanie Taylor as illustrating such goals and endeavours, describing her public lectures in the 1930s as an 'emergent presence of theorizing around visual cultural history at the University of Melbourne over a decade before the establishment of the Herald Chair of Fine Arts'. Peers, 'Women Artists as Drivers', 12.

⁸¹ Jennifer M. Jones and Josie Castle, 'Women in Australian Universities, 1945–80', *Vestes*, 26:2, 1983, 16–7.

Australian general public is also reflected in popular media. Carter argues that magazines played a vital role in 'the formation of a modern intelligentsia, and in particular a self-consciously national intelligentsia'.⁸² Carter's argument in this instance is centred on the role of avant-garde magazines and 'serious' literary and cultural quarterlies; however, popular mainstream magazines had similar impulses on different levels of scale. Perhaps not aiming to create a widespread intelligentsia, David Company's observation that mainstream magazines sought to cultivate an 'intelligent cultural commons' rings true in the case of the *Australian Women's Weekly*.⁸³ This case study does not imply that the magazine was exceptional or exclusive in this kind of informed and educative coverage of the arts for broad publics. By contrast, it is but one of many examples of popular Australian press coverage of the visual arts and art history in Australia in the mid-twentieth century. The scope and range of arts coverage in these publications give a general impression that the arts were seen (by their editors) as important to be covered and engaged with. But, beyond editorial intentions, magazines are also incredibly valuable because through them we can trace direct engagement from and dialogue between the publics that these publications so keenly addressed.

Audiences and reception

Some of the most fruitful reasons for engaging with magazines in historiographic research are the opportunities they present to analyse audience engagement and interaction. Carter writes that a history of magazines is always also a history of audiences, because to 'invent a new kind of writing is also to invent a new kind of reader, a new audience'.⁸⁴ Popular historiographic methodologies are particularly well suited to this undertaking, and it is here that I would like to consider how they offer potential benefits for the study of art history. Popular historiographies have strong capacities to facilitate engagement with wider ideas of spectatorship and readership. Questions of audiences and reception are central to studying most forms of popular media because they are ingrained in the ways that these media define their roles, their identities, and their contributions. Television shows seek high ratings, for films it is box office numbers, and magazines visibly track and publicize their circulation numbers.⁸⁵

Why is this relevant for the study of art history today? Because it reinforces the importance of understanding not just the construction of value and meaning through seminal texts or artworks but also the transmission and dissemination of those values and meanings. As Kerr Houston notes, there has been a shift in art history, particularly in the last fifty years, that has increasingly started to consider ideas of spectatorship and the 'beholder' of an artwork. Houston cites Thomas

⁸² Carter, 'Magazine History', 12

⁸³ David Company, 'Walker Evans: Reading the Magazine Work', paper and discussion presented at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 7 October 2016.

⁸⁴ Carter, 'Magazine History', 13

⁸⁵ These performance indicators still exist today but they have shifted and evolved to also include online responsive measurements such as downloads, streams, shares, subscribers or followers.

Frangenberg and Robert Williams when making his argument that the shift towards considering the beholder's experience of art has been one of the most important developments in recent art history, because 'where a work's meaning used to be thought of as something contained within it, we now recognise that meaning is now produced by an interaction between the work, its environment, and the viewer'.⁸⁶ Such continued considerations of the position of the viewer is vital for contemporary art history: artists are highly informed about and inventive in the ways they address their viewers, and cultural institutions are increasingly obliged and invested in needing to attract large and diverse audiences. These institutional obligations are undoubtedly linked to the neoliberalization of cultural and artistic labour; however, contemporary art history is in a privileged position to both critique *and* productively contribute to these sector movements.

Houston's recent study is overarchingly dedicated to the physical viewer of art in exhibition and gallery spaces. Yet, there are further opportunities to expand art history's considerations of viewers to specifically consider when and how those viewers encounter art outside of the gallery or the explicit space of the artwork. This includes engaging with art through texts, writings and popular media presentations of visual art, in which viewers equally become 'readers'.⁸⁷ By readers I am not returning to a structuralist relationship between creator and consumer, akin to Roland Barthes' famous dictum that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author'.⁸⁸ I am interested in how art history can understand how general audiences' experiences of engaging physically and visually with artworks can intersect with engaging with them intellectually and conceptually – being both readers and viewers simultaneously and convergently. A significant amount of recent analysis has considered the ways that museum displays and didactic information *in situ* affect, support, or distance viewers' experiences within galleries.⁸⁹ But, audiences' engagement and interaction with artworks in galleries is also strengthened and shifted when the viewer brings established knowledge, understanding, curiosity, and value towards the art that they are encountering. Popular media external to the space of the institution have vital roles to play in constructing those perceptions that viewers bring with them to galleries and spaces of art. On this point, the argument of one of the most articulate of arts communicators, John Berger, continues to ring true:

⁸⁶ Quoted in Houston, *The Place of the Viewer*, 9–10.

⁸⁷ Something that is perhaps overlooked in the 'embodied' viewer analyses, as viewers today are also readers within the gallery space, encountering didactic panels, wall texts, exhibition guides, and other such written mediating devices.

⁸⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana, 1977, (142–8) 148.

⁸⁹ There is significant literature in the developing areas of curatorship studies and museum education studies. As a very small selection, see Jeffrey K. Smith and Lisa F. Smith, 'Spending Time on Art', *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 19:2, 2001, 229–36; Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson, *Creating the Visitor-centered Museum*, New York: Routledge, 2016; Shari Sabeti, *Creativity and Learning in Later Life: An Ethnography of Museum Education*, Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2017; Jennifer Blunden, 'The Sweet Spot? Writing for a Reading Age of 12', *Curator*, 60:3, 2017, 291–309.

What we make of that painted moment when it is before our eyes depends upon what we expect of arts, and that in turn depends today upon how we have already experienced the meaning of paintings through reproductions. ... The issue is not between innocence and knowledge ... but between a total approach to art which attempts to relate it to every aspect of experience and the esoteric approach of a few specialised experts who are the clerks of the nostalgia of a ruling class in decline. ... The real question is: to whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong? To those who can apply it to their own lives, or to the cultural hierarchy of relic specialists?⁹⁰

Berger's definitions of 'specialisms' are arguably outdated characterizations in relation to contemporary cultural and academic sectors; however, his wider points about preconditioned knowledge and its application in public appreciation of art remain prescient. This is why it is crucial for art history to consider popular media constructions and communications of the arts. By understanding and analysing the influential mediators of such knowledge transfer and value construction, art history can apply its own knowledge and expertise to critique, develop and also understand the histories of diverse engagement.

Returning to this article's opening example of *Blue Poles*, Pollock's painting underscores how its history and ongoing cultural significance in Australia can only be critically understood by engaging with histories and social contexts outside of art history. Its purchase was a genuine media event and it was covered extensively across the mainstream press, something that Lindsay Barrett chronicles in detail in his study of the painting's links to 1970s Australian cultural politics.⁹¹ The painting was reproduced on the front pages of every major newspaper in the country, and Barrett argues that the media debate around *Blue Poles* was often limited and reduced to the following contentions and questions: 'was *Blue Poles* the work of a troubled genius or a worthless gimmick?'⁹² The painting's purchase price has also characterized its ongoing cultural mythology, from the moment of its purchase.⁹³

To a certain extent, these rather limiting narratives around *Blue Poles*'s cultural significance continue to this day. Yet even in the case of *Blue Poles* – the most mediatized artwork in Australia – the popular media archive reveals counter narratives to those that have become prominently historicized and mythologized. Coverage of the media story was not limited to the news dailies: it featured in the popular weekly and monthly magazines of the day. In magazines the discussions of the arts are often less parochial than in the major newspapers, and frequently more focused on reporting and writing with an educative and informative quality. Magazines actively cultivated their audiences, and their tone of writing reflects this conscious engagement. Similarly, magazines are useful because the responses and engagement of those audiences can often be traced distinctly across their pages.

⁹⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: BBC and Penguin, 1972, 31–2.

⁹¹ Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card*.

⁹² Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card*, 9, 21.

⁹³ Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card*, 33.

Doing so often reveals levels of visual literacy and informed understanding of art history that can be broader and more diverse than has been presumed.

The *Australian Women's Weekly* covered the purchase of *Blue Poles*, along with other prominent acquisitions by the Australian National Gallery at the time, and its readers responded to this coverage through writing letters to the weekly 'Letter Box' section. In response to *Blue Poles*, a number of letters reveal great enthusiasm for the purchase as well as informed understanding of modern artistic practices:

'Blue Poles is the culmination of nearly 30 years of study, hard work, and forward-thinking experimentation.' – Miss S. D. Case, Blakehurst, NSW, 9 Jan 1974

'Since the camera has become a common object among families there is no need for paintings to be faithful reproductions of what we can see; it frees the artist to express his feelings about what he sees. ... I see no waste of money in buying this piece of unusual art.' – 'Modern art, too' (name supplied), Woolgoolga, NSW, 19 Feb 1975

'I feel *Blue Poles* and *Woman V* [by Willem de Kooning, also purchased at the same time] have been wisely chosen.' – 'Appreciating art' (name supplied), Alstonville, NSW, 19 Feb 1975

'I can only be thankful we have men of vision, responsibility, and courage to see beyond such limited horizons as of those who would deny the Australian people, both present and future, the richness of the wonderful collection of art now being formed for the nation.' – Beryl French, Highett, Victoria, 19 Feb 1975

Some letters praise the overarching vision of the gallery's director James Mollison⁹⁴ while disagreeing with the purchase of the Pollock itself. Other contributors voiced clear disagreement with the purchase: these arguments were often framed around general dislike or misunderstanding of abstract art, and views that the large amount of money could have been 'better spent', usually on things like infrastructure and local services.⁹⁵ These latter arguments have come to be seen as the dominant social view of the purchase of *Blue Poles*, but the letters to the editor of the *Australian Women's Weekly* reveal that public discourse was diverse and often broad-minded as well as frequently nuanced and informed in its nature. The quotes cited above are particularly important because they go against a narrative of Australian philistinism that has also come to dominate Australian social commentary, argued publicly by historians and public intellectuals at the time.⁹⁶ These case studies, easily overlooked

⁹⁴ Officially he was acting director of the Australian National Gallery at this time.

⁹⁵ 'Readers' Thoughts on *Blue Poles*, *Woman V*', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 19 February 1975, 38.

⁹⁶ Writing directly in response to the reaction to *Blue Poles*'s purchase in *The Australian* newspaper, Bernard Smith wrote that 'the Australian electorate is aggressively Philistine'. Quoted in Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card*, 43.

in the reams of magazine pages and not presented centrally across featured articles, in fact reveal a great deal about art's reception in Australia – positive, negative and ambivalent. The responses also highlight levels of informed art historical knowledge and interest present in the broader Australian public (and in this case specifically Australian women) *despite* more limited options for them to pursue tertiary art historical study at the time.

Given the genuine media spectacle of *Blue Poles* in the 1970s, it makes sense that broad media analysis forms a crucial element of understanding the painting's influence and impact in Australian society. Controversies are frequently the easiest and most prominent form of media coverage of the arts in Australia, from reporting on record auction prices to scandals around provenance, forgeries, and art frauds.⁹⁷ Yet, I want to argue that the significance of a work of art does not need to be associated with controversy or infamy in order to benefit from scholarly methodologies that consider its position and representation (or lack thereof) in popular press and media. Popular historiographical methods can be useful when identifying and tracing engagement with art history that has been present in a wide range of social spheres, but has potentially been overlooked due to preconceived notions around the value of popular texts such as magazines. This is crucial, because popular historiographies also concern themselves with contesting restrictive divisions of value across media forms – such as how distinctions between lowbrow, highbrow and middlebrow are used to distinguish different media formats. Carter argues that these complex relations of value, form, and audience play out particularly strongly in magazine studies. Different distinctions of form, publication schedule, and target audiences all contribute to connotations of respective value – such as 'the prestige attached to the quarterly'.⁹⁸ Hierarchies and perceptions of prestige *do* characterize magazines; however, magazines themselves are often explicitly active in contesting and challenging such divisions. In his analysis of the Australian literary magazine the *Triad*, Carter outlines the magazine's self-positioning upon its 're-imagining' in 1925 as follows: 'The New Triad is neither High-brow nor Low-brow. It is Broad-brow. That's not a compromise. It's a challenge: a challenge to the few who still imagine that the Triad appeals exclusively to literary and artistic coteries'.⁹⁹ Similarly, the Australian 'barbershop' magazine *Australasian*

⁹⁷ The recent high-profile trial surrounding alleged forgeries of Brett Whiteley paintings in Australia demonstrates this, as does the ongoing popularity of the BBC television show *Fake or Fortune?* (2011–present). See Gabriella Coslovich, *Whiteley on Trial*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2017.

⁹⁸ Carter, 'Magazine Histories', 12.

⁹⁹ David Carter, 'Literary, But Not Too Literary; Joyous, But Not Jazzy: Triad Magazine, Antipodean Modernity and the Middlebrow', *Modernism/Modernity*, 25:2, 2018, 251. Carter notes important connections between the *Triad* and Sydney Ure Smith's influential visual art publications of the period: 'From January 1926, the magazine had been owned by Art in Australia Ltd. Magazine publisher Ernest Watt bought it in March 1927, and in August 1927 launched the *New Triad*, with Watt and poet Hugh McCrae as editors. It lasted only until July 1928'. Carter, 'Literary, But Not Too Literary', 266. Even though this association did not last long, the connections between these magazines in terms of their design standards and upper-middle-class readership persisted, and is further emphasised by comparison to one of Art in Australia Ltd's other flagship magazines of the time, *The Home*.

Post opens its 11 April 1946 editorial – following a recent ‘rebranding’ exercise – with this statement: ‘One of the beliefs we have is that there is ample room in Australia for a good weekly magazine neither highbrow nor lowbrow, catering for all sections of the community rather than for some particular section’.¹⁰⁰ In reality, these two magazines would have been appealing to distinctly different audiences, and yet similar narratives are at play: aiming for the space *between* high and low culture. These cultural divisions play out actively and self-consciously across the pages of Australian magazines.

Of course, the extent to which such divisions between highbrow and lowbrow remain useful descriptors is contestable (an important scholarly discussion, but one that is beyond the scope of this article). These considerations are particularly important for art history and the visual arts because although tensions of cultural value and taste play out across all art forms, certain forms straddle the spectrum of lowbrow to highbrow more easily than others. Popular media such as literature, film, and music, for example, all have genres, formats, and styles that can actively span the spectrum (therefore enabling interesting crossovers in object and audience). By contrast, it could be argued that the visual arts, and art history in particular, are still perceived as more ‘highbrow’ endeavours. In a recent report about the perceptions of the arts by ‘middle Australia’, cultural think tank A New Approach concluded that the term ‘the arts’, when used alone without additional qualifiers (such as ‘arts and culture’), ‘prompts imagery of the high arts, which are seen as elitist and as being more for other (wealthier) people, not them’.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the Australia Council for the Arts’ most recent National Arts Participation Survey has recorded an increasing proportion of Australians who believe that ‘the arts are not really for people like me’.¹⁰²

As an art historian with a background working in public galleries, I do not subscribe to the view that art history and the visual arts are elitist and primarily highbrow pursuits, but it is the perception of elitism that must be challenged actively for art history to remain relevant and be perceived as accessible and engaging to broad audiences. It is precisely at this juncture that popular historiographical approaches can benefit the contemporary study of art history. As I have demonstrated, popular historiographies can reveal counter narratives that challenge the perception of the visual arts and art history as highbrow and elitist, uncovering informed knowledge of and interest in the arts across broad elements of society. Furthermore, popular historiographies can also work to counter elements of elitism that may still persist within the discipline itself. Analysing the presentation of art through non-specialist publications and popular media forces us to consider the role and contributions of these texts outside of scholarly modes of criticism and review. It allows us to re-evaluate the value of arts communication within popular spheres of media. Neglecting the histories of more popular and populist

¹⁰⁰ ‘Report from the Editor’, *Australasian Post*, 11 April 1946, 5.

¹⁰¹ Kate Fielding and Jodie-Lee Trembath, *A View from Middle Australia: Perceptions of Arts, Culture and Creativity*, produced by A New Approach think tank with lead delivery partner the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra, 2020, 7.

¹⁰² Australia Council for the Arts, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, 2020, 48–9, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>.

engagement with the arts risks missing a broader understanding of how dominant and influential narratives around art are transmitted to and interpreted by audiences outside of those with high levels of pre-existing knowledge of art. As I will conclude, this is not simply a concern for academic art history: it has real world implications and applications.

Conclusions and contemporary applications

Popular historiographic approaches are valuable because they consider expanded fields of public reception and, crucially, they facilitate engagement with current scholarship that reconsiders the role and position of spectatorship within art history.¹⁰³ This article has focused on examples and case studies from Australian art and media histories to argue for the benefits of integrating popular historiographic approaches within the study of art history. There are a number of reasons for this article's regional focus on Australian art and art history. The first is that Australian art historiography has not dedicated significant time to investigating the impact and influence of popular media in disseminating and (re)constructing dominant art historical narratives of Australian art. This is in contrast to examples internationally, including the substantial amount of scholarship that has been dedicated to the cultural influence of popular American magazines such as *Life* and *Time*, and the histories of arts and cultural coverage of public broadcasters such as the BBC. There are excellent precedents in this intersectional field of art, cultural, and media histories that Australian art history can benefit from.

Secondly, the specific histories of Australian news media themselves need to be considered in more detail. These histories are beyond the scope of this article, but they remain crucial and generative areas for scholars to keep exploring. Media historian Bridget Griffen-Foley has observed that:

Since the 1980s, there has been a blossoming of research into Australian media history. But there remains much to be explored, written and produced, and much critical thinking to do as media historians engage in ... interdisciplinary research, and [integrate] their research into broader analyses of social and cultural change.¹⁰⁴

As Griffen-Foley outlines, there have been important methodological shifts during this time, but there remains many challenges when studying media histories. Media archives and corporate records, for example, are often scattered, fragmented, inaccessible, and vulnerable to destruction.¹⁰⁵ Yet, these limitations also illustrate some of the benefits and rewards that come from researching this field, because they speak to the ways that media histories overlap across broad cultural, social, institutional, and political spheres. This includes important intersections between

¹⁰³ Houston, *The Place of the Viewer*.

¹⁰⁴ Griffen-Foley, 'Inaugural KS Inglis Address', 13.

¹⁰⁵ Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'Media Archives – History of Australian Media', <https://researchdata.edu.au/media-archives-history-australian-media/11502>.

considerations of the global and local, which can again help to trouble, unsettle, and unpack narratives of parochialism, provincialism, and philistinism.

Finally, it is vital to dedicate more time and critical analysis to these mediated art histories because the amount of arts coverage present in Australian media has declined in recent decades.¹⁰⁶ In contrast to what we see in the case studies of many twentieth-century magazines – where the arts were often seen as a core part of editorial and news coverage – nowadays the mainstream Australian media coverage of the arts has been deprioritized and decreased. Arts coverage is often seen as an optional extra rather than core business or, more worryingly, used as a tabloid target for sensationalist or ‘gotcha’-style articles.¹⁰⁷ Commentators such as Alison Croggon, Ben Eltham, and Jane Howard have all variously connected the decrease of arts criticism to the wider struggles of the arts sector, arguing that ‘we live in a country where the government can strip arts funding ... because as a country we don’t talk about art’.¹⁰⁸ According to these recent analyses, the state of arts writing, arts communication, and arts criticism in Australia reveals much broader challenges of the visibility and value of the arts and cultural sector. There is limited political will to emphasize and centre the arts in Australian society at the moment, and that perceived indifference can feel all-consuming, especially in light of the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is also important to note that the post-war era in Australia (and post-1970s in particular) was one of significant growth, support, and capacity-building across the arts sector, driven by the formation of the Australia Council for the Arts and its founding functions.¹⁰⁹ The sense of cultural ‘malaise’ being felt strongly today is reflective of relatively recent government and political interventions: the histories of both Australian cultural policy *and* arts media communication converge to remind us of legacies of support and engagement with the arts that are more substantial and nuanced than might be presently presumed.

¹⁰⁶ John Daley, *Performing Arts Advocacy in Australia*, Sydney: Australian Major Performing Arts Group, 2021, 28–9.

¹⁰⁷ One of the popular patterns of this type of coverage is the ‘exposé’-style article that stokes outrage about supposed ‘misuse of public money’ for contemporary, experimental, or controversial artworks and arts practices.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Howard, ‘Australia’s Culture of Arts Criticism Is Broken, and There’s No Clear Way to Fix It’, *The Guardian*, 24 October 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/oct/24/australias-culture-of-arts-criticism-is-broken-and-theres-no-clear-way-to-fix-it>. See also Alison Croggon, *Criticism, Performance and the Need for Conversation*, Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency House, 2019; Ben Eltham, *When the Goal Posts Move: Patronage, Power and Resistance in Australian Cultural Policy 2013–16*, Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency House, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ The Australia Council for the Arts’ founding functions were: ‘a) to formulate and carry out policies designed (i) to promote excellence in the arts; (ii) to provide, and encourage the provision of, opportunities for persons to practise the arts; (iii) to promote the appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of the arts; (iv) to promote the general application of the arts in the community’. In subsequent years it has pursued goals (i) and (iii) more actively; however, these functions do speak to earlier desires to integrate the appreciation and practice of the arts expansively across Australian society. Australia Council Act, Commonwealth, 1975, Section 5.

The current state of arts communication in Australia highlights the complex links between the media, government support of the arts, and the flow-on effects of broader public perceptions of the arts and culture. This vital nexus reveals the final and perhaps most important imperative for developing methodologies of popular art historiographies: they can contribute critical understanding and new knowledge to pressing and urgent debates about how the arts are valued and perceived in Australian society today. This article refers implicitly to legacies and narratives of perceived philistinism in Australia and, although my research into popular magazines reveals this to be a more complex space and a more nuanced narrative than often believed, I have not refuted it entirely. Such narratives *do* persist in Australian public discourse. Only recently, conservative Australian senator James Paterson called for *Blue Poles* – now worth AU\$350 million – to be sold to reduce national debt.¹¹⁰ Nothing amounted of Paterson's appeal, but it underscores the ongoing presence of such cultural narratives in public discourse. It also emphasizes the ongoing relevance and importance of subjecting these narratives to critical, historical, and culturally informed analysis. By documenting the histories of popular engagement with the arts, including across mainstream media, we can develop nuanced and broad understandings of how cultural values and perceptions form and evolve over time. This research aims to identify effective models of arts communication that have fostered moments of informed engagement with the arts and have supported visual literacy, so that they may continue to be applied to debates around arts access and engagement today.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all my colleagues at the Centre for Art History and Art Theory, Australian National University, who have given me excellent feedback as this article has developed. Particular thanks go to Elisa deCourcy, David Hansen, Martyn Jolly, Chris McAuliffe, Sarah Scott, Rosalind Smith, and Robert Wellington. I would like to thank the article's peer reviewer Terry Smith, whose comments and critiques were incredibly useful and have undeniably helped me improve the final article. Publishing in the *Journal of Art Historiography* has been a pleasure, my sincere thanks go to Richard Woodfield for his engagement with the research and support across the entire process. Copy-editing of this article was undertaken by Belinda Glynn, thank you. The publication of this article was supported by a research grant from the Australian Institute of Art History.

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¹¹⁰ Matthew Doran, 'Painting Blue Poles, Worth \$350m, Should Be Sold to Reduce National Debt: Senator James Paterson', *ABC News*, 7 October 2016, [https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-07/governments-\\$350m-painting-should-be-sold-to-reduce-debt/7911882](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-07/governments-$350m-painting-should-be-sold-to-reduce-debt/7911882).

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Tracing cultural values through popular art historiographies:
Australian popular magazines and the visual arts

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