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“Fear of Knowledge”

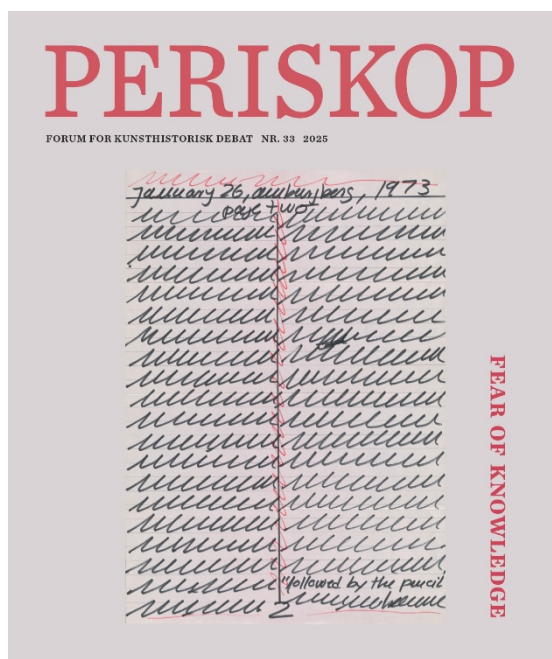
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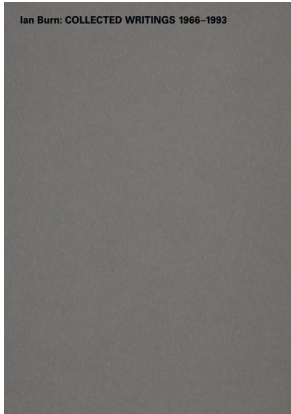
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Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966-1993.

Ed. Ann Stephen.

Power Publications, KW Institute for Contemporary Art
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2023.



Did Australian art historian Ann Stephen discover the alchemical formula to transform a massive, 800-page, 1.4 kg book into a manageable, engaging, and approachable object? Behind the book's imposing size and compact form, the editorial work shines with a unique approach to

exploring Ian Burn's life and work, as well as the artistic and political transformations of the era.

Born in 1939 in Geelong, on Melbourne Bay, and dying tragically in 1993, on the east coast near Canberra, Burn is, according to Stephen, "an activist, a trade unionist, a journalist, an art critic, a curator and an art historian", and, in the artist's own words, "an ex-Conceptual artist" (11). Before Burn's death, Stephen knew and collaborated with him. Since then, Stephen has dedicated a substantial portion of her academic career to studying Burn's visual and textual work and deliberately places the label "artist" at the end of the sentence. In this way, she emphasizes this designation while warning against the limitations of simple categorization. And, if experts and aficionados of conceptual art or contemporary Australian art are already familiar with Burn's complex trajectory, it is only through reading *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966-1993* that they can fully comprehend the extent of the artist's multifaceted commitments.

The book appears at first glance to be a monochromatic volume, except for a touching portrait of the young artist at his desk on the back cover [1]. It evokes the neutral parallelepipeds of Minimalism, a movement with which

Burn was intimately familiar, both as an informed viewer and as an emerging art producer. On further inspection, the seemingly solid gray exterior conceals a lively crimson interior. From the very beginning, it is clear that the editing process is meticulous, precise, and of high quality. Indeed, the collection of fifty texts by Burn is carefully organized, with a subtle chronological and thematic structure that may be too intricate for some new readers. Alongside the anthology is a comprehensive critical section. The book begins with an extensive introduction by the editor, followed by concise headings for each text. It also includes a selection of previously published and unpublished texts from conferences that artists and friends gave in tribute to the artist after his death (Allan Sekula, Adrian Piper, Mel Ramsden and Paul Wood).

More than half of the texts in the anthology were co-authored, forming a productive collaborative constellation around Burn. Moreover, the anthology's very form, which Stephen addresses after producing an admirable intellectual biography of the artist in 2006, provides insight into the artist's practice. It also recalls a context of emulation, transdisciplinarity, and a particularly intense circulation of knowledge in which he evolved from the 1960s to the 1990s. Nevertheless, a more expansive recontextualization – i.e. beyond the close artist's social circle – might be beneficial in understanding the disruptions, continuities, bold decisions, and theoretical paths that Burn has taken. This is particularly relevant given his various travel experiences, encounters, and areas of interest. In this regard, Stephen points out that "the spelling, capitalisation and word-hyphenation of Burn's original texts have been retained, with American or Australian/British spellings conveying his work across continents." (8) Beyond the geographical dynamics, all the texts testify to the "shifting collaborative and conceptual nature" (8) of Burn's work with Mel Ramsden, first in London (1964–1967) and then in New York (until 1976), and with many other collaborators. His journey continued when, in 1977, he returned to Australia and distanced himself from the official Western, transatlantic art world. For a period of ten years

after his return, Burn devoted himself to two distinct commitments. First, as a journalist, he became a central figure in the organization of the Art & Working Life program and the development of the Artworkers Union. Additionally, he deepened and expanded his research into the recent history of Australian art. He shared his findings in articles, at conferences and in exhibitions. In doing so, he clarified the subtleties of Australian art and, more particularly, the works of certain Indigenous artists as well. This is where Burn probably offers us an extensive and fascinating range of texts on these often-overlooked subjects. Ultimately, his deep political and theoretical commitments did not prevent him from returning to pictorial production at the turn of the 1990s and reengaging with the conceptual artistic concerns of the 1960s. The anthology allows readers to explore many facets of his intellectual and artistic trajectory through

essays that are both accessible and pedagogical, while remaining critical and never demagogic. This is largely because Burn's writings are remarkably well-balanced, reflecting a combination of the artist's inventiveness, the historian's rigor, and the teacher's attentiveness.

Analyzing this diverse anthology comprehensively and systematically is no easy task, but it would be a shame not to delve into the intricate connections that the editor skillfully weaves throughout. Based on the theme of this Periskop issue, I will explore one of the recurring concepts, knowledge, which appears over a hundred times in the anthology.

[1] Ian Burn at his desk in Finsbury Park flat, London, 1966. Behind him are his paintings: *Re-ordered Painting No. 2*, 1965 and *Yellow Blue Equivalence*, 1965-66. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.



Looking at Seeing and Reading and Knowing

In the late 1960s, when conceptual art was emerging, and before he joined the Art & Language group, Burn produced a series of works that blurred the line between an academic essay and an artwork. By merging these two genres, he created a seamless transition, ensuring a captivating and thought-provoking read. These texts, including *Mirror Piece* (1967), *The Role of Language* (with Mel Ramsden, 1968) and *Notes on Analysis* (1970), show a marked interest in the subject of perception and vision. It's worth noting that his exploration of perceptual frameworks prompted a substantial shift in his artistic practice, transitioning from visual art to text-based forms. His investigation of perception is rooted in the study of art history and theory, as advocated by the art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), and is further shaped by his deep immersion in philosophy and epistemology. Notably inspired by the American philosopher of science R. H. Hanson (1924-1967), Burn states, "what we see is shaped by prior knowledge," and that "seeing embraces concepts of knowledge." This implies that any work of art appears in "an epistemic claim, not into the eyeball." (195) Rather than merely playing with visual effects, he employs textual forms and linguistic mediation to open up a dialogue and create intellectual stimulation. Within the Art & Language collective in New York, Burn gradually expands his text-based and analytical approach to a more collaborative and conversational ethos. In 1993, shortly before his death, Burn returned to these issues with the organization of the exhibition *Looking at Seeing and Reading* in Sidney. In addressing the question of the epistemic construction of how every act of seeing is grounded in an epistemic framework, he insists on "a 'space' between what we see and what we know" (625). This initial reflection leads him to conclude that "pure seeing" connected to "an ideal or transcendental subject" is impossible.

Local Knowledge, Peripheral Vision

Burn then focuses on "the acknowledgment of a socially produced subject, that is, an historically specific viewer (spatially) coextensive with the object." (637) Con-



[2] Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, *Soft-Tape*, 1966, installation with tape recorder and wall text, reconstructed for *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in the 20th Century Art*, 8th Biennale of Sydney, 1990. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

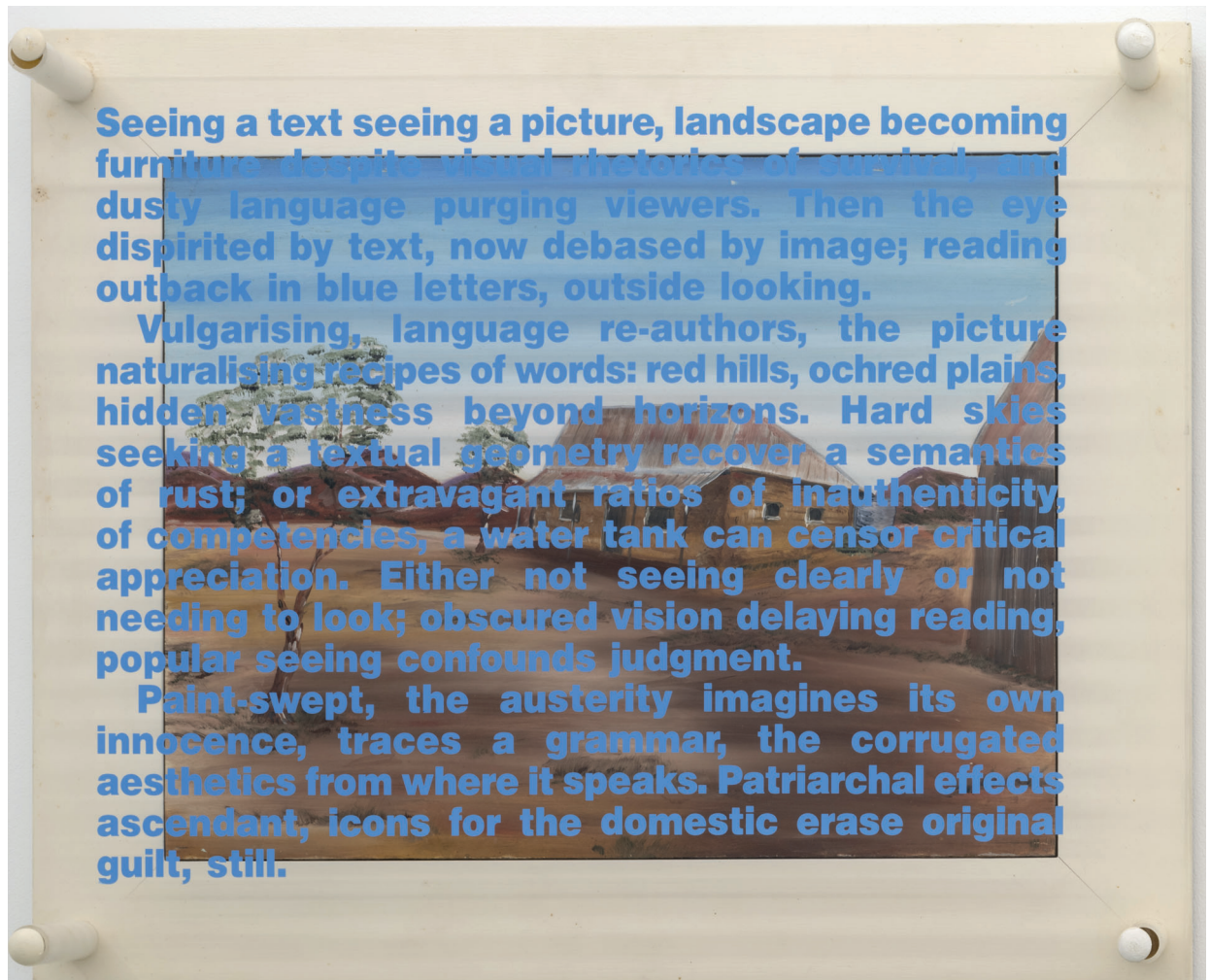
sequently, Burn develops the idea that knowledge is informed by its contextual anchoring, being always historically, spatially, and socially determined. Moreover, as with the reflections on perception, the question of local knowledge pervades the anthology. This is evident in some of his earliest conceptual works, such as *Soft-Tape*¹ (1966) [2], as well as in his essays on art history written in the 1980s, which are notably influenced by postcolonial theories. Burn's defense of situated knowledge stands in contrast to what Stephen rightly describes as "the orthodoxy of a universalizing modernist order" (35). This issue is particularly salient in Burn's writings when compared to those of some of his conceptual counterparts. Burn has consistently grappled with the issue of geographical and cultural hierarchy on a global scale. He was keenly aware of cultural imperialism, which took various forms, including symbolic and even physical domination. As an Australian who had lived in London and New York before

returning to Australia, he had a nuanced understanding of both contexts and the power dynamics that shaped them. He achieves a theoretical tour de force by proposing a particularly inspiring concept that unifies the question of situated knowledge with that of non-neutral vision: peripheral vision (introduced in “Glimpses: On Peripheral Vision” in 1990 and subsequently developed in “Namatjira’s White Mask: A Partial Interpretation,” written with Stephen in 1992). In doing so, he aims to “open up possibilities of developing counter-narratives within European history, as well as counter-narratives to Eurocentric history.” (570)

“Critical, Political”

From this point forward, his reflections on the relationship between perception and knowledge are not just phenomenological or epistemological, but remain genuinely political in nature. Burn’s political views emerged in the 1970s, as seen in the thematic structure of the anthology and Stephen’s introduction. They were shaped by his

[3] Ian Burn and unknown artist, ‘Value Added’ Landscape No. 5, 1992, oil, ink, wood, Perspex, 48.9 x 59 x 10.5 cm. Image courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.



immersion in New York's artistic and activist communities, and continued to evolve in the 1980s with his return to Australia and involvement in labor union activities, which temporarily overshadowed his artistic output. His approach is informed by (post)Marxism and characterized by a certain analytical rigor. It is both macro, structured around a geopolitical analysis of American imperialism, and micro, turned towards what was then called identity politics. The anthology allows us to examine this transformation in depth. Burn ensures a subtle transition between a Marxist critique specific to the 1970s, focused on the central question of class struggle, and "intersectionality", influenced by feminist and postcolonial approaches². Throughout, Burn maintains a focus on the art world, demonstrating that artistic expression is inherently intertwined with matters of power, suppression, and prejudice. The author also stresses that cultural institutions, particularly museums, should be more than just places for "spatializing a set of ideas about a history of art" but strive to "exclude, segregate, disenfranchise, marginalize, affiliate, homogenize" (541). These institutions do not accommodate "unacceptable' ethnicities or national traditions [...] women artists and to more" (544) and impose their dominance over geography and culture. In this perspective, Burn reminds us that "neutral white walls aren't neutral." Similarly, we could paraphrase it: neutral knowledge isn't neutral.

Burn's multifaceted commitments are a story of transitions between (apparently) antipodean points:

Australia and New York, modernism and conceptualism, phenomenology and politics, between a managerial and bureaucratic gray and a radiant revolutionary red. He established points of convergence and stimulated circulation, both conceptually and artistically [3]. However, his work was never about versatility or opportunism. Rather, it has consistently been characterized by intense inquiry and coherent reflection, with a critical and purposeful use of knowledge. Thanks to Stephen, Burn's life and work still serve as a reference today, thirty years after his death, in understanding the many issues surrounding contemporary art. His endeavor also remains a source of inspiration for transforming our world by combining the use of hands and heads, matter and ideas, dreams and hopes.

LOUIS-ANTOINE MÈGE

NOTES

- 1 The first artistic collaboration between Burn and Ramsden, *Soft-Tape* was produced in 1966 in London and finally installed for the first time at the Biennale of Sydney in 1990. It is an installation made in two parts: an almost inaudible sound recording on cassette and a wall notice, explaining the context of production and the theoretical ambition. For instance, they say: "We consider words, either spoken or written, to be a necessary part of our objects." It became a canonical piece of early conceptual art.
- 2 For instance, Burn mentions the writings of Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha and Trinh T. Minh-ha, and feminist art publications such as *Lip* (Australia), *Heresies* and *Feminist Art Journal* (both New York).