

## **Peripheral Visions: The Working Life of Ian Burn**

*Let us tear ourselves away from our speculative activity and find the way to work, applying our knowledge and skills to real, live and expedient work.*

....

*Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat.*

—Alexi Gan, 1922<sup>1</sup>

*If unionists aren't interested in culture, it's because culture often isn't very interesting.*

—Ian Burn and Ian Milliss, 1983<sup>2</sup>

On a clear day in 1977, artist Ian Burn and his family board a jet from New York City to Sydney, Australia. He is returning to the land of his birth after thirteen years abroad. This move is the culmination of a series of contradictory desires, relationships, and life demands. Burn is leaving the New York art scene after years of involvement with the people, institutions and ideas that comprised a vital strand in the history of contemporary art. His departure, at first sight, appears as the end of his engagement with the ideas and strategies of a vanguard movement of which he was a significant member. Against this, we will argue that Burn's exit must be understood as the continuation of the more radical dimensions of his work, and that his decisions and actions remain a model for alternative practice today.

### **I'll be your Mirror**

There is something quite familiar about Burn's trajectory from periphery to center. Born in Australia in 1939 to an industrious family of carpenters and builders, Burn was drawn to art from an early age. His strong sense of composition led him to study at Melbourne's National Gallery Art School, one of Australia's preeminent art schools. Singled out as a promising student, he moved from Melbourne to London

<sup>1</sup> Alexi Gan, "Constructivism," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900-1990* (Oxford UK, Blackwell, 1992), 320.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Milliss and Ian Burn, "Art and Working Life: Cultural activities in the Australian trade union movement" (1983, retrieved in July 2013 from <http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/AWL.htm>).

in 1965. There he met Mel Ramsden, a young painter who had grown up in Australia and the UK. The two took in all the art that the town had to offer, but were still eager for more. Arriving in New York in 1967, Burn worked as a frame maker by day while creating new paintings in his cramped studio apartment each night. Ramsden soon joined him and they both encyclopedically began moving through art historic styles, from Mondrian's grid to hard-edge abstraction all the way to practices that embodied the formal concerns and issues of the day. So far, a familiar story indeed.

The work Burn began to produce in the late sixties explored the perceptual and phenomenological foundations of art. Although his training had been as a landscape and portrait painter, Burn, like many of his generation, had lost faith in painting's ability to replicate physical space. His responsiveness to the history of painting and his questioning of its mimeticism led him in 1967 to produce a series of mirror works. *1-6 Glass/Mirror Piece*, for example, is a series of six identically framed mirrors each behind a sheet of clear glass plate hung at eye level—replacing the stable content of a painted surface with the shifting images of whatever is before it, turning from landscape to portrait to self-portrait and back again. For another work, titled *Hume's Mirror*, Burn stenciled the self-reflexive phrase NO OBJECT IMPLIES THE EXISTENCE OF ANY OTHER in the center of a 60x60 cm mirror. The act of looking is here redirected back on itself as the viewer becomes conscious of the paradoxical nature of the quote and the dissonance it creates between oneself, the mirror and one's own image. About this phenomenon, Burn wrote: "The extent to which we are able to see the mirror surface ... depends on a self-consciousness of the possibilities of seeing: on being able to look at ourselves seeing and on being able to interpret our not-seeing of the surface."<sup>3</sup>

In 1967, Burn began working with the technology of reproduction and image making. His source material for *Systematically Altered Photographs* were black and white images of bucolic Australian suburban landscapes sourced from pamphlets distributed by the Australian Consulate in New York. Part of the Consulate's public relations campaign to inform Americans about their new junior partner in the Vietnam conflict,<sup>4</sup> these images were submitted to a series of mechanical alterations. Burn xeroxed the original photographic image in a standard copying machine. He then ran the resulting copy through the same machine, repeating this process over and over again. The imperfections of the copying process exponentially abstracted the original, until all that remained was a mechanical parody of a pointillist landscape. The resulting image was paired with the original in a stacked diptych.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Stephen, *On Looking at Looking: the Art and Politics of Ian Burn* (Victoria: Miegunyah Press, 2006), 118.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 72.

The content of the images can easily be read as Burn's critical response to seeing his homeland represented as the antipodal corollary to America, which not only shared similar values and lifestyles but also the same suburban vistas. But rather than musing on the political content of his own imagery, in his writing Burn scrupulously drew the viewer's attention away from geopolitical specifics and toward the general questions of perception and language:

“What are we implying when we say we recognize content? ... In seeing, we typically substitute an appropriate language for the actual object in order to facilitate our ‘seeing’ of it—our language screens the object, it's the grid which structures our perceiving.

...

If I have two reproductions of a landscape, then I may see a detail in one and look for it in the other: but seeing it in the second case would seem to depend more on the condition of seeing it in the first case than on any interim ‘looking for’.”<sup>5</sup>

In his next series, Burn moved further away from specific pictorial content to advance his investigation of the perceptual dimensions of art viewing. His *Xerox Book*, made in 1969, was a bound work made of one hundred pages of letter-sized paper. Again using an ordinary copying machine, Burn started with a blank sheet of white paper, copied it, then used this reproduction to produce a third copy, repeating the process until he arrived at the hundredth iteration. No two pages are the same, as the electronic static steadily increases, leaving an abstract field of black marks on the white page. Burn simply initiated and then archived an action: the composition is determined by the imperfections in the machine, not by the hand of the artist. For Burn, it was the idea of the process, more than any page of the book, which comprised the work. Burn's previous investigations into the perceptual dimension of painting led him to create works that consider a process or concept as works of art. Sol LeWitt could have had Burn's work in mind when he penned these lines in his 1969 “Sentences on Conceptual Art:”

27. The concept of a work of art may involve the matter of the piece or the process in which it is made.

28. Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. ...

29. The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.<sup>6</sup>

Accompanying all of Burn's work from this period were written addendums, sometimes displayed as didactics on the wall, other times as incorporated elements in the piece itself. The texts were usually crafted in a cold analytic style, directing the viewer's attention to the role of language within the production and reception of art. In 1969, Burn, Mel Ramsden and fellow artist Roger Cutforth joined together to explore the possibilities of language-based practice. They organized themselves

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” in Harrison and Wood, *op. cit.*, 837.

under the flamboyantly bland title “Society for Theoretical Art and Analysis” and set out to jointly publish their ideas. Their journal, *Art Press*, was inaugurated later that same year, with works from the three artists as well as contributions from Sol LeWitt, Adrian Piper and others. In *Dialogue*, a text-based piece written for the journal, Burn mused on how a linguistic practice reinvented the relationship between artist and viewer:

Artists are exploring language to create access to ways of seeing.

....

Language suggests, through the idea and viewer, a kind of dialogue or “conversation.

....

Participating in a dialogue gives the viewer a new significance; rather than listening, he becomes involved in reproducing and inventing part of that dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

**“Art is what we do, culture is what we do to other artists.”<sup>8</sup>**

Burn and Ramsden were certainly not the only artists exploring the possibilities of language-based practice. As art historian Anne Rorimer has noted, by the late sixties many artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry and Joseph Kosuth were using linguistic elements “without subordination to an all-encompassing pictorial field or sculptural format and, equally significant, without direct or necessary affiliation with the literary arts.”<sup>9</sup> In 1969, Burn and Ramsden met Joseph Kosuth through a mutual affiliation with the curator Donald Karshan. Immediately noting their shared interests, the three started working together to ghost-curate an exhibition under Karshan’s name. *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, held in 1970 at the New York Cultural Center, was an early survey of the types of language-based practices in which they were all involved. By this time, Kosuth was already working as the American editor for the English collective Art & Language and introduced their writing to Burn and Ramsden. Taken by the similarities in their work, the Society for Theoretical Art and Analysis officially joined Art & Language in 1971.

Founded in 1967-1968 by a group of artists circulating around Coventry, England, Art & Language was a collaborative venture that engaged in art production and publishing. The original group consisted of Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge and Howard Hurrell. As Charles Harrison—general editor beginning in 1971—describes it, the group found it necessary to collaboratively explore the production of language and its effects on systems of meaning: “It seemed to be required that practice be made of the representing and misrepresenting discourse

<sup>7</sup> Ian Burn, *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 38.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 71.

itself, and of its own fissures and discontinuities; that it be made of these materials, and of such theoretical materials as might be employed in their analysis.”<sup>10</sup> Like Burn and Ramsden, the other members of Art & Language were interested in how the turn towards language could generate new relations between artists and audiences. Rather than creating objects to be passively consumed by the viewer, they imagined a field of meaning generated in the linguistic space between the artist and viewer “participant,” a *dialogue* that could happen outside of the limitations of the gallery. As Harrison has noted, the work of Art & Language “was either done with no installation in mind, or was to be realized in social and discursive life outside conditions of its installation. It presupposed not a form of responsive emotion but a form of responsive activity. It achieved its intended form ... not through being beheld or otherwise institutionalized, but through being criticized, elaborated, extended or otherwise worked on.”<sup>11</sup> With such a broad and amorphous model of engagement, it is not surprising that the people affiliated with Art & Language ebbed and flowed over the years, reaching high points of more than forty members, and at other times returning to a conversation between two or three. The nexus of the group’s activities was *Art-Language*, a journal published several times a year. As representative of Art & Language’s general strategy, the journal was supposed to operate as the main interface between different constituents within the group as well as a public to which its ideas were both directed and willfully obscured.<sup>12</sup> Burn and Ramsden became involved after the publication’s first edition and quickly became, along with Kosuth, the center of the satellite branch, known as ALNY.

Over the following several years Art & Language’s practice developed into two dominant strands. Each path imagined a distinct approach to the relationship between aesthetics and politics. The first strand moved ever deeper into an auto-hermeneutics, mining the collective archive of the group’s writing and conversations to produce a self-sustained idiolect. The exemplary piece was *Index 01*, produced for the 1972 Documenta exhibition in Kassel and perhaps Art & Language’s best-known installation work. It consisted of eight industrial filing cabinets placed on plinths at regular intervals in the gallery space, reminiscent of the Minimalist aesthetic, filled with essays, letters, musings, transcribed notes from meetings and unpublished manuscripts. The walls were covered with photostats of text charting the relationship between various statements. The dizzying proposition was carried out in maniacal, obsessive fashion, leaving no writing out, no matter how fleeting or insubstantial.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Using language as an artistic medium meant deprivileging its communicative function. In Harrison’s words: “It is true that a kind of militant ‘refusal to signify’ was a predominant feature in Art and Language’s public face, and that this refusal to signify was accompanied by a refusal to clarify.” (*ibid.*, 98).

A lithograph for the exhibition, entitled *Alternate Map for Documenta*, charted the possible relationships between eighty-seven documents in the index, mapping hundreds of permutations—separated categorically into those statements that were “compatible with each other, those that were incompatible and those that did not share the same logical/ethical space.”<sup>13</sup> Follow-up works such as *Index 02* and *Annotations* continued to clinically map the relationship of ideas created by members in order to investigate the linguistic and social relations within the group. Underlying these initiatives was the belief that the reinvention of formal considerations internal to art production could produce political effect. The second strand of Art & Language’s evolution looked outward in order to demonstrate how artistic production of this kind was embedded within larger political and social relationships. They utilized the group’s strategies of self-reflexivity and systems theory to analyze the world in which it operated.

### **A Logical Implosion**

Burn was intimately connected to both parts of Art & Language activity, but his primary interest lay in furthering a critical analysis of the art industry. Works such as *Comparative Models* scrutinized the cultural capital invested in a handful of mostly New York-based critics and publications. He, Ramsden and others removed the spine of the tenth anniversary edition of *Artforum*, hanging each page sequentially on a gallery wall. Over certain pages, they superimposed blocks of bright yellow paper inscribed with their own interpretations and annotations, which discussed the possible art worlds that were not represented in the pages of the canonical publication. Soon afterwards, in 1975, Burn published “The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation” in the same publication. In it he bitingly critiqued the machinery of contemporary art, focusing in part on the social, political, economic and psychological effects on artists. Connecting capitalist expansion with the call to endless avant-garde innovation, he wrote: “This popular idea of a permanent revolution in art is actively designed never to fulfill any personal and social relationship. From this point of view, it is set up of empty gestures which threaten none of the market requirements and end up being a sheer celebration of the new individuality, arrogantly and, finally, stupidly set against the idea of sociality.”<sup>14</sup> Foreshadowing imminent decisions in his own career, Burn found hope in the growing shared consciousness among New York artists opposing the “factory-like” conditions of exploitation in the art market.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 74.

<sup>14</sup> Burn, “The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation,” *Artforum* (April 1975), 34.

<sup>15</sup> “One presently noticeable outcome of this concentration and (some sort of) socialization of ‘art labor’ is the recent tendency to unionize, to organize the community to have some efficacy of its own” (*ibid.*, 37).

Burn's rejection of the art industry's practices did not stop there, but extended even further into a political critique of the imperialistic dimension of modern and contemporary art. The export of US—read New York—art to all corners of the world led Burn and fellow Australian and sometime Art & Language collaborator Terry Smith to theorize the issue in terms of “provincialism.” They argued that provincialism was a defining characteristic of every artist's relationship to public acknowledgement and art historical recognition. In their analysis, the closer the artist is to the positions of cultural power, the more pressure is exerted to rationalize the normative cycle of exclusion and selection.<sup>16</sup> For artists working in the periphery, this situation seemed cyclically disempowering as the importation of new art trends from the center through traveling exhibitions perennially rendered local practices irrelevant on the world stage. In his article “The Provincialism Problem,” Smith incisively imagined the brutal but familiar situation of an Australian artist who chances a career in New York:

As soon as he is able the young provincial artist leaves for the metropolitan center, where he picks up competencies for art-making in terms of the most obviously ‘advanced’ style... Returning home, he proselytizes his new vision of artwork and art world around Sydney and Melbourne, often winning converts, throwing others into the position of reactionaries ... until his initiative runs aground.

....

He might then return to the metropolitan center only to discover that the style to which he has committed himself has changed in incomprehensible or unbridgeable ways. Also, its authority will probably have diminished, ... its proponents engaged in the futile rear-guard reactions against the newest avant-gardism. The provincial artist returns home to find to his dismay the same crisis building up for him.<sup>17</sup>

Burn and Smith's critique of cultural imperialism was not simply an academic or theoretical pursuit. In 1974, Burn and Ramsden were invited to mount an exhibition of Art & Language in three venues across Australia. The show, *New York < > Australia*, attempted to create a discursive space within the museum that dealt directly with the issue of cultural export. Art & Language members would communicate with participants in the exhibition over international cable transmission, leaving ample room to reflect upon the gaps and dislocations implicit in this form of cross-cultural dialogue. As the pamphlet for the exhibition stated, the cables were “anticipated to pick up a lot of (your) socio-cultural ‘noise,’ as well as reflect a lot of ours ... There isn't, between you and me, a clear channel. Making the ‘noise’ explicit or accessible

<sup>16</sup> “Only the most myopic elitist can regard the hierarchical rigidity, the inbuilt unfairness of the New York art world with equanimity. It casts most of us all the time, and a few of us some of the time, into the provincialist bind, whether we live in New York or outside. The further away we live, the less we can rationalize our entrapment” (Terry Smith, “The Provincialism Problem,” *Artforum* (September 1974), 58).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 57.

is making ordinarily habitual processes self-conscious, ... and hence ... we have some potential for revisability of our languaging/cultural situations ....”<sup>18</sup> Although the members of Art & Language were unaware, a traveling exhibition was being assembled at MoMA at the same time. *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse* was to be displayed at two of the three venues where Art & Language intended to stage these dialogues. Seeing the explicitly critical positions of Art & Language as a threat to the smooth operation of the *Modern Masters* exhibition, curators worked to avoid having the two shows overlap. Under intense pressure by MoMA, including the threat of legal action, to ensure that the exhibition would not receive unflattering publicity or undue scrutiny, the Australian institutions took dramatic steps. One venue flatly cancelled Art & Language’s exhibition, the other moved the dialogues to a nearby, unaffiliated art school and refused to publicize the events. In later writings, member Michael Corris reflected upon this situation in which he, Burn, Ramsden and other participants had been enmeshed during the mid-seventies:

The Australian conversations were an attempt to illuminate, in a totally different cultural setting, the effects of self-alienation induced by modernism. It may be claimed that some issues—such as cultural imperialism—encouraged a reconsideration of Art & Language’s situation and led to a partial revision of the group’s practice. ... Towards the end of 1976, Art & Language found itself in an untenable condition, riven by internal conflict over the dilemma of whether to literalize the political dimension of art or remain situated within the social limit prescribed by avant-garde practice. Ranged against each other were those who considered themselves to be artists caught in the paradoxical web of cultural politics with no clear way out and artists who believed the way forward to be a direct engagement with radical politics for the purpose of the creation of ‘effective’ visual propaganda.<sup>19</sup>

Although for some time this division between the two strands of Art & Language had proved mutually productive, the fissure ultimately led to what Harrison refers to as the “logical implosion” of the group.<sup>20</sup> Despite their success in symbolically creating a self-generating, open-sourced system of meaning production, the collaboration never actualized an alternative system of cultural expression that was a viable alternative to the gallery-museum-collector nexus. The year leading up to the disbanding of Art & Language New York in 1976 was rife with personal conflicts, ideological disputes, accusations of careerist opportunism and transatlantic bickering. Remnants of these bitter fights can still be heard and felt today in the writings of various participants. Charles Harrison reflected back upon the turbulent division of the group in these words: “On pain of denial of the project of historical materialism, it needs to be remembered that the practice of art is made not only of

<sup>18</sup> *New York < > Australia* pamphlet, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1975.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Corris (retrieved in July 2013 from [http://blurting-in.zkm.de/e/another\\_look](http://blurting-in.zkm.de/e/another_look)).

<sup>20</sup> Harrison, *op. cit.*, 75-76.

theory, competence and critical gain, but also of bad conscience, dirty hands and waste.”<sup>21</sup>

The New York members of Art & Language soon scattered, moving on in various geographic and artistic directions. Art & Language carried on in name, returning to a core group which gathered in Banbury, England. The collaboration, once including dozens of people, returned to a working relationship between Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, who went on to create a body of work that revisited the conditions and possibilities of painting.<sup>22</sup> Although the two went on to produce series such as *A Portrait of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock*, *Hostage*, and *Incident at a Museum* under the Art & Language banner, the use of the name to create paintings which circulated in commercial galleries has remained a contentious issue for dispossessed members of the group, even years later.<sup>23</sup>

Given the theoretical foundation of their shared practice, it is no surprise that many Art & Language members, including Charles Harrison, Terry Smith, Michael Corris, Terry Atkinson and Sarah Charlesworth, went on to teach at various academic institutions in the UK and US and publish many influential texts in the field of art theory. The production of new pedagogical structures within arts education must surely be seen as an important part of Art & Language’s legacy.

### **Working Conditions**

Burn, for his part, chose to move back to Australia. He was still committed to an art practice that was critical of the mechanics of the larger capitalist art world, but he struggled with setting up a new working life in his homeland. While the size and depth of the art community in New York had afforded him a platform to assert these critiques while maintaining an active position within the field, in Australia this strategy became unsustainable. At first, like many of his Art & Language associates, Burn turned to teaching. Though he worked in several academic institutions around Australia, he was turned down for a full-time position in Sydney, in spite of recommendations from Sol LeWitt and Max Kozloff.<sup>24</sup> Equally difficult was Burn’s attempt to reintegrate into the communities of politically engaged artists working in Sydney and Melbourne. Some greeted his return with suspicion,

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.lissongallery.com/#/artists/art-and-language> (retrieved in July 2013).

<sup>23</sup> “Even though we came to a joint agreement to end Art and Language in 1975, Michael, with the support of a couple of others, picked up the name again with the return to painting in the early eighties and did these embarrassing and disastrous group paintings under the name Art & Language contrary to that history. I think one can safely say they have more in common with a Julian Schnabel than previous Art & Language work” (Joseph Kosuth interview, *Art and Australia* (2010), 591).

<sup>24</sup> Stephen, *op. cit.*, 185.

jealousy or indifference. Burn had earlier theorized provincialism as a symptom of the internalization of hierarchy in the art world; he now faced its local forms of resistance and retribution.

Ian Milliss, an Australian artist heavily involved with the radical political culture of the 1960s and 1970s, had had earlier ties to Burn. Active in politically oriented arts groups such as the Contemporary Arts Society, he was nevertheless acutely aware of the political limitations of art production. Milliss focused much of his attention on social activism, working in the Green Ban movement (a precursor to the German Green movement) and the squatters' rights movement which centered around Victoria Street in Sydney.<sup>25</sup> Although they would go on to work together intimately, Milliss recounts Burn's shock in finding that "no-one in this well developed scene had very much respect for his fame as a conceptual artist, and over the next few years Ian was far more influenced than influencing, as he had rapidly to adjust to different criteria for judging work, such as strategic effectiveness in a campaign rather than art historical relevance."<sup>26</sup>

In his writing at the time, Burn reflected in a more personal tone on the alienation that had been a catalyst for his own earlier success: "One of the things which is very clear to me now is the extent to which the work I was doing during the sixties entailed the suppression of my own (non-American, non-European) cultural history. Of course suppression wasn't how it appeared then—rather it was a process of devaluation of what was specific to my cultural history. ... The substantial content of the work was ideologically predetermined by the avant-garde tradition within which it was produced. Any values unsympathetic to this ideological character were excluded or suppressed."<sup>27</sup> In Burn's early works, allusions to his homeland had given way to a literal tabula rasa of conceptualism. From *Systematically Altered Photographs* to *Xerox Book*, Burn had allowed the mechanical process to erase all external cultural connotation. From then on, the strict internalized logic of Art & Language had steadily moved Burn's work further from cultural specificity towards universalized materials and content. Looking back, Burn recognized the ghost in the (copying) machine. Having returned home, he was ready for an exorcism and despite the difficulties he quickly found himself in the midst of challenging discussions.

By 1979, the controversies surrounding the third Sydney Biennale proved to be a catalyst for structural change. Artists joined together to discuss the need for greater inclusion of Australian artists as well as equal representation for women artists. More

<sup>25</sup> For more information, see <http://www.ianmilliss.com> (retrieved in July 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Ian Milliss, "A Tribute to Ian Burn" (1993, retrieved in July 2013 from <http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/OnBurn.htm>).

<sup>27</sup> "Ian Burn, Hero of the Biennale," in Helen Grace (ed.), *Before Utopia—A Non-Official Prehistory of the Present*, CD-ROM (University of Western Sydney: 2000).

generally, they demanded an early voice in the process of curatorial structure, artist selection and allocation of funds.<sup>28</sup> Along with Ian Milliss and many others, Burn took part in producing an anti-catalogue<sup>29</sup> for the 1979 Sydney Biennale entitled *White Elephant or Red Herring: Comments from the Art Community*, which included critical essays elaborating the struggle for inclusion and democratic proceedings within the exhibition. Fortuitously, this critical collection garnered wide circulation and readership as it was mistaken for the official exhibition catalogue; the genuine article was not available at the time of the opening. Burn and Milliss collaboratively authored an essay calling for Australian artists to unionize and protect their joint interests. Using the Biennale as their case study, they extrapolated its meaning for the lives and working conditions of artists: “In the art world we are constantly pitted against one another, competing against each other for grants, sales, prizes, positions, etc. [...] Events like the Biennale exploit this situation ...”<sup>30</sup>

The entrenched visions of individualism that have always made unionization within the visual arts difficult continued to cause rifts within the emerging organization. In a 1993 interview, Burn recalled the initial difficulty in finding a common purpose: “I can remember long debates at committee meetings about what constituted an industrial issue within the arts industry. People had a lot of problems trying to think of their art activity in industrial terms.”<sup>31</sup> Through months of lively and at times contentious meetings, the Art Workers Union (AWU) formed in 1979 as a political and social platform for Australian artists working across disciplines and stylistic bounds. At first the AWU directed their actions towards the larger institutions of the Australia Council and the Sydney Biennale, calling for artists’ contracts and a program of affirmative action. Later they organized a health and safety campaign strategically intended to unify disparate factions, and as Milliss described, attack “one of the many bits of art world cognitive dissonance, the romance of working in the worst possible conditions.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> For more information, see Vivienne Binns and Ian Milliss, “History/Herstory” (1979, retrieved in July 2013 from <http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/historyherstory.htm>).

<sup>29</sup> Much like the anti-catalog produced as a response to *American Art*, a 1976 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art assembled from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III. This was created by the group Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, which included Art & Language members Joseph Kosuth and Sarah Charlesworth.

<sup>30</sup> Ian Burn and Ian Milliss, “Don’t moan, organize!” (1979, retrieved in July 2013 from <http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/DontMoanOrganise.htm>)

<sup>31</sup> Burn, interview, in Grace, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> This was not without its ideological, personal confrontations, as Ian Milliss’ comments about workerist factions display: “Some of them are friends of mine now but then they were classic ruling class maoists or trotskysts, naive academics for whom unionism had a sort of rough trade glamour. They were mostly recent arrivals in Sydney, had been involved in Art & Language or student politics and were all loudly preaching unionism and community involvement, oblivious of the fact that plenty of people in Sydney, like me or the Earthworks people had already been doing this for five or six years previously.” (1993, retrieved in July 2013 from <http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/BeforeUtopiaInterview.htm>).

By 1982, the AWU was able to organize successfully for the use of contracts in the following Sydney Biennale. When interviewed in 1993, artist, AWU member, art historian and Burn biographer Anne Stephen reminisced about the success of the union at “changing the landscape—the expectations under which artists work in Australia and dealing with bread and butter issues like contracts and fees, but also articulating the more general concept of artists rights like other workers. ... The Australia Council now has written into its funding policies that artists must be paid fees. In other countries that doesn’t exist and I think it exists here because of the strength of our campaign.”<sup>33</sup> It was through his work with the members of the AWU that Burn embarked on the next phase of his creative life, one that took him further from the demands of the art world into another type of communal life experiment. Beginning in 1980, Burn and Ian Milliss worked together on several initiatives to further the cause of the labor movement through cultural production and distribution. For their immediate source of income, they (along with Lesley Pearson and Dale Keeling) established Union Media Services, which supplied media and marketing for national unions and left-wing organizations. Their aim was to utilize contemporary media practices to counter the narrowing of the labor movement’s sphere of cultural influence. This was also an attempt to move outside of the limitations of the art world and actualize the role of the artist as an agent of direct social engagement. As Milliss recounts: “One great advantage of working with unions was the possibility of developing a viable economy that did not rely on any other [capitalist] financial support. On the other hand we had another more important but less obvious role as catalysts of social change both within the union movement, the wider society and the art world and that role was the important part from our point of view and our real objective.”<sup>34</sup> Union Media Services prospered for many years, allowing its collaborators an amount of freedom to pursue additional strategies of cultural change in Australia. In the same spirit, Burn and Milliss were involved in the early eighties in creating the Art and Working Life program, which, like Russian Constructivism of the 1920s, attempted to bridge the gap between artists and the labor movement, and between artistic modes of expression and the utilitarian needs of daily life. Their coauthored text “Art and Working Life: Cultural activities in the Australian trade union movement” expressed the three major initiatives of the organization:

1. The attempts to bring entertainment and educational programs into the workplace;
2. The direct use of artistic forms of expression in trade union work;
3. The development of workers’ own cultural skills, expression and appreciation.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Stephen, interview, in Grace, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Milliss, email to authors, December 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Milliss and Burn, *op.cit.*

To this program, Milliss later added a fourth objective: “The presentation of the nexus between work skills and creativity and the nature of work as cultural activity and innovation.”<sup>36</sup> Activities of the Art and Working Life program included the creation of slide kits on topics relevant to labor politics, the publication of pamphlets that archived different elements of union history, as well as the organization of concerts, poetry readings, and plays around workplace issues.

Australia was no exception to the global neoliberal turn of the mid-eighties. With the conservative opposition gaining power in the Australian Parliament, the Art & Working Life program, partially funded through governmental grants, came under increased scrutiny. An exhibition organized in 1985 by Burn (*Working Art*, which documented union posters, journals, newspapers, protest banners, and films and videos produced for or through labor organizations) became a lightning rod for rightist claims that government funds should not be spent on union propaganda. Furthermore, union membership and clout were diminishing in the face of increasingly conservative governments and new corporate models of “liberated” capital. With their base sliding, Union Media Services underwent steady decline. For both Milliss and Burn, the stress of running a difficult business while attempting to maintain the embattled position of labor-based cultural producers proved too much. After bitter arguments related to the business, Milliss left the organization in 1984 and went on to work as a consultant in media and arts policy for the Australia Council and several national unions. Burn stayed on until the nineties. As Milliss recounts, Union Media Services “reached equilibrium at a lower level of activity but it still provided Burn with a platform and political credibility that he could use while rebuilding a career in the art world as a writer, theorist, curator, teacher.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Vision, Revision, Return**

By the 1990s, Burn had already passed through the peaks and crests of two important leftist cultural projects of the second half of the century. His early works in conceptualism and institutional critique, as well as in the dematerialization and decentralization of the visual arts, had brought Burn into contact with some of the most influential artists and theorists of the era. His later work in the expanded field of artistic production placed him within the major political struggles over the control and dissemination of culture in Australia. Yet Burn would not live to see the struggles of politically engaged artists in the new millennium: he died in 1993 in an accident off the coast of New South Wales.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Milliss email, December 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Milliss email, December 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Roberta Smith, “Ian Burn, 53, Artist, Writer and Founder Of an Artists’ Union,” *New York Times* (9 October 1993).

The year before his untimely death was marked by many returns. Burn held a one-person exhibition in Melbourne, his first in decades, featuring his series *Value Added Landscapes*. For the last few years of his life, Burn had been collecting amateur landscape paintings from junk shops and thrift stores, which he mounted here in thick white frames behind clear acrylic panels. A block of text overlaid on each panel matched the dominant hue of the painting beneath. In the added written component, Burn ruminated on the act of viewing as well as the politics of geography, representation and painting. For instance, *Value Added Landscape #4* reads: “Sentences, paranoid of pictorial ambitions, imagine a landscape beyond the text. Romantic sophistries, national idolatry rendering insights into sight...” In comparison to the post-Art & Language efforts of Ramsden and Baldwin, Burn’s *Value Added Landscapes* stood out for their humbleness of scale and content. In an uncanny replaying of their biographies, the work of the remaining members of Art & Language privileged sites of the international art circuit, while Burn’s works engaged the politics of vision against the pastoral backdrop of the Australian periphery. By elevating junk store finds to objects of contemplation in the circuit of high art through his selection and manipulation process, Burn undoubtedly endowed them with value above their original worth. Yet by making this additive procedure visible, he also prompted the viewer to question his or her own entrenched valuation of cultural production. Burn wrote in 1983: “Too often, these [amateur] activities are dismissed as not worthy of much attention or support. Moreover... what most people encounter as culture reinforces the idea that ‘real’ culture should be left to the experts. In reassessing amateur activities, we need to develop ways of appreciating them, not by professional standards, not as simply the ‘low’ end of the scale, but as cultural activities which serve different needs within different groups or communities.”<sup>39</sup> The eulogies prompted by Burn’s death capitalized on this last series of works to produce an easily recognizable, circular narrative of the artist’s career. In these melodramas of homecoming, the seeming contradictions between Burn’s success in the New York art world and his inglorious repatriation to Australia and subsequent work in union “journalism” were symbolically reconciled by his prodigal return to landscape painting. These narratives, however, surely failed to account for the complexities of a life spent in constant search for the critical means to mobilize art for the common good.

It is impossible to surmise what paths Burn’s practice would have taken had he lived longer. Nonetheless, what turned out to be his last public artistic gesture problematizes any easy notion of an “exit” from the art world. As can be so poignantly witnessed in Burn’s life, the vicissitudes of his practice were not determined by

<sup>39</sup> Milliss and Burn, *op. cit.*

definitive openings and closures, but by an ongoing, vital negotiation of what it means to live a creative political life. Burn's was a model based on duration and activism rather than the ephemerality, privatization and spectacle that tend to characterize contemporary artistic attempts to intervene in the social sphere. Instead of privileging the privatized space and time of artists' exhibitions, Burn helped to organize inclusive, ongoing dialogues where the ideas debated were internally generated and agreed upon by the constituents. Imagined through the cultural lens of unionist inclusion, Burn's model of human relations did not presuppose passive spectatorship, but demanded active participation in a community of worker-creators. These groups did not manufacture *images* of human relations to be judged aesthetically. Rather, they created and operated meaningful democratic spaces with all of the requisite antagonisms and failures that accompany such a difficult and wide-ranging undertaking.

Burn's efforts at revitalizing a leftist cultural front in Australia provide an example of politically effective aesthetic practice. The Art Workers Union and Art & Working Life campaigned to reimagine the scope of cultural production and enact changes from the community level upward. Through direct engagement with larger social and political entities such as unions, government, and cultural institutions, these groups not only reconceptualized the larger role of culture but also redirected the means of distribution and funding required to establish such alternatives. Although the particular solutions that Burn arrived at in his artistic life may no longer be available today, we can nonetheless be politically regenerated by the rediscovery of such productive strategies of resistance and radicality on the peripheries of history. In a 1993 tribute to his long-time collaborator at the Trade Union Arts Officers Conference, Ian Milliss noted the importance of upholding a living history of these practices: "Ian knew that whoever controls the writing of history controls the future. No matter how effective we have been in setting up more democratic forms of artistic practice, these forms can be destroyed again by the constant denial of their validity or even of their existence."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Milliss, *A Tribute to Ian Burn*, *op. cit.*