Ian Burn's conceptualism - includes commentary - Transcript

Following his early involvement with Conceptual art, Ian Burn turned to cultural work with the Australian labor movement and an engagement with questions of land and landscape.

Ian Burn was an Anglo-Australian artist best known for his participation in the New York branch of Art & Language, a Conceptual art collective that flourished in the early 1970s. The New York branch of this collective published, most notably in The Fox, Marxist analyses of power relations, commodity production and exchange within the art world. Its members also composed, performed, recorded and videotaped some extremely funny rock-and-roll songs with revolutionary lyrics that often quoted from Marx.

But Burn had an artistic career both before and after this period. Before, his work evolved from early traditional landscapes and self-portraits into increasingly abstract and, beginning in 1965, Minimalist paintings. These led to Conceptual art works and installations which then motivated his participation in the Art & Language group. After Art & Language disbanded, he seemed to disappear from the international scene. In fact he returned to Australia in 1977 to work for the Australian labor movement through a small company, Union Media Services. There he organized cultural programming for trade union members, curated exhibitions of their art work and wrote related essays and commentaries. He published articles on Anglo-Australian landscape painting and on Albert Namatjira, an Aboriginal artist of the Aranda (Arrernte) tribe. In addition, Ian was well known as a careful and demanding writer on and curator of contemporary art, and he served as unofficial advisor to several dissertations in esthetics and art history at Australian universities.

It transpires that after work at his day job, he was also resuming the production of art objects himself and indeed returned to landscape painting--but through a singular process. He went about collecting amateur landscape paintings, sometimes signed but often anonymous, which he purchased in junk shops. He then composed and printed on Plexiglas lyrical and associative texts for each, which he mounted in front of the painted surface. And shortly before he drowned in an accident in 1993, he completed a series based on his own very early amateur landscapes, which he overpainted with paradoxical and philosophical texts he had composed for them. At the time of his death he was 53 years old.

What follows is a slightly revised version of the inaugural Ian Burn Memorial Lecture, sponsored by Monash University and the Australia Council, which I delivered at Monash University in Melbourne and at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in July 1996.

I feel particularly privileged to have been offered the opportunity to look more extensively at Ian Burn's late work, as well as the early work he did before he became a member of the Art & Language group, which was when I met him. I am going to lecture on a slightly different topic than I'd originally planned. I was going to talk about the correspondences between Ian's work and my own in terms of the themes we shared: social commitment, a sense of locatedness with regard to political circumstance, as well as our interest in Conceptual art. I found that the more I looked at the entire body of his work the more involved with it I became, and with its unity and conceptual consistency.

In this talk I am going to take issue with Ian for the second time. The first time was in 1975, the only occasion we actually met. He had published an essay, "Pricing Works of Art," in The Fox #1. In response I'd published "A Proposal for Pricing Works of Art," in The Fox#2. Ian called and suggested we discuss it the next time I was in New York (I had recently moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to take up graduate study in philosophy). We met in his loft; I recall that Mel Ramsden, another early member of Art & Language, was also there. Ian was very stern and severe. He accused me of not having really addressed the issues he'd raised in his essay. Actually he was right. At that time I just hadn't had enough exposure to the art-market side of the art world to think subtly about it, so my essay was very abstract. But of course I wasn't going to admit that to him. So we had quite a spirited discussion. He was intellectually rigorous and morally uncompromising in his arguments. I had thought I would escape that for a few days by getting

out of Cambridge, but I was wrong.

So now I want to argue with Ian again, and in particular with his claim that Conceptual art failed because of the internal contradictions it generated. Here's what he says in the essay "The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath," written in 1981:

The most significant thing that can be said to the credit of Conceptual Art is that it failed . . . to fulfill certain initial expectations and ideals, and its goals were in many ways unattainable.... For those who took the inevitable steps beyond Conceptual Art--and stepped outside of the market-dominated avant-garde heritage--part of the understanding of the necessity of this was arrived at as a function of Conceptual Art . . . [whose] real value . . . lay in its transitional (and thus genuinely historical) character, not in the style itself.(1)

I want to claim, on the contrary, that Conceptual art in fact succeeded, and that the totality of Ian's work is the best proof of how it succeeded. Conceptual art has always had radical implications for practice, and Ian was one of the few Conceptual artists I know of who followed through those implications with absolute consistency. Others whom I would categorize similarly include Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler.

Defining Conceptual Art

First I want to look at Ian's definition of what Conceptual art is. In fact he offers two related definitions. The first is from his 1970 essay "Conceptual Art as Art." He says, "It replaces the customary visual object constructs with arguments about art..."(2) Now I particularly want to call attention to this first claim, because in it Ian ascribes to Conceptual art a particular style and form, namely that of language. He says that Conceptual art replaces the object of art with arguments about art, and arguments are the sort of thing that can occur only in written or spoken language. For Ian and the Art & Language group at that time, written language was of course primary.

He goes on to say about Conceptual art, "It inquires into the nature of the concept `art' . . . [its] intention . . . is to devise a functional change in art ...."(3) Here he characterizes two features of Conceptual art: first its self-reflexive content, the idea that what you do when you do Conceptual art is to examine the concept of art itself, to look directly at the nature of the discipline in which you're engaged. So there's a self-conscious aspect to it. He thinks quite rightly that this includes a critical self-awareness of one's own practice, the circumstances of one's production and the implications--both socially and perhaps metaphysically and philosophically-- of that production. He amplifies this idea later, in his essay "The 1960s," when he describes Conceptual art as "an amalgam of attempts to critically analyze and dissect the situation in which artists were working, to assume responsibility for articulating these ideas and develop ways of incorporating that critical perspective into the work of art itself."(4)

Then, secondly, he talks about Conceptual art as being intended to produce change. So there's a practical and social aspect to his conception of Conceptual art. It's supposed to alter the form of art: it's supposed to alter what art can do and how it might function socially and economically.

Now this business about Conceptual art having a particular style comes into conflict with an earlier characterization of Conceptual art with which I'd like to modify Ian's definition. This is Sol LeWitt's notion that in Conceptual art, the idea or concept is more important than the object in which it's realized.(5) What Sol is saying here can be understood in many ways. Personally I think most of us misinterpreted what Sol meant. I think he meant to take what you might call a Platonic view, that the concept of a particular work-- any work, be it sculpture, drawing, text. videotape, whatever you like--is a kind of perfect form to which the realization, the actual work itself, is just an imperfect approximation. Just as Plato distinguished between sensory reality and the world of pure forms, similarly Sol, I think, meant to distinguish an actual art object as a sort of crude sensory approximation of an idea, a concept, that can exist only in the intellect; and then to say that it's that idea, the pure concept of the object, that's important. This would explain why Sol further remarks that what the work looks like is not important, that the work is good if the idea is good.(6)

This notion of Conceptual art opened the door for lots of people to stop worrying about packaging their art in streamlined, polished

form, to use funky materials, to use different kinds of materials that got at the idea of the work rather than that merely looked beautiful. Sol's was also a very generous characterization because it could apply to any kind of work--Minimal sculpture, lithography, anything you like.

Most of us who were influenced by Sol's definition had what you might call a topical interpretation of it: what was most important about a work, on this view, was its conceptual content, how intellectually exciting and challenging it was, how much it required the viewer to stretch conceptually, how profound it was.

This opened up intellectual subject matter for a lot of us in new ways. Dorothea Rockburne was interested in number theory and geometry, Mel Bochner was interested in mathematics, Bernar Venet was interested in physics, Joseph Kosuth was reading Wittgenstein, Bob Smithson was reading about geology. It was a real liberation from the art-school mindset, which held that to be an artist you have to learn 60 million different ways to make things: you paint them, draw them, silkscreen them, cast them, weld them, carve them, sand them, glue them, melt them, saw them, mold them, bake them, hammer them, pinch them, sew them, weave them, sculpt them, drip them, pour them, throw them, and on and on. Conceptual art taught us that artists can think about things, too, and read things, and write things, and analyze them and research them and document them and describe them and argue them. Once this happened, intellectual work generally and writing in particular became just one more artistic medium for visual artists to give form to their ideas.

For many of us that was the end of formalism, the end of art for art's sake as an autonomous realm independent of the world, because to mine this intellectual content we needed to draw on all those fields and areas that previously had been considered off limits: the social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, even the other arts. You could use any medium you wanted--film, videotape, sculpture, text, language, performance, dance, street actions, music. By concentrating on the idea rather than the medium, you could see connections between Yvonne Rainer's choreography and Bob Morris's sculpture and Alain Robbe-Grillet's fiction; or Sol LeWitt's sculpture and Steve Reich's music and Samuel Beckett's plays; or Bob Smithson's sculpture and Michael Snow's films and Lucinda Childs's choreography; or Richard Serra's sculpture and Phillip Glass's music and Gertrude Stein's poetry. All became grist for the mill of Conceptual art, and many of us who later went on to do work in performance, video and mixedmedia installation were inspired by these interconnections.

So I think Ian's definition of Conceptual art needs to be understood in the context of this broader account that Sol gave. We saw that Ian explicit restricts Conceptual art to its use of language. But in that same early essay, when he objects to other people's work as not being "conceptual art in the strict sense," it turns out that his objections are not to the style of the work but rather to its content; for example, that it s anecdotal, or frivolous, or autobiographical, or self-absorbed. So I propose that we think of Conceptual art in this more open-ended way, as being art that subordinates its medium, whatever its medium, to intellectually interesting ideas. If you look for unity and developmental coherence not in style or medium but rather in intellectual content, you can see the unity and coherence of Ian's own work as an ongoing project in exploring the limits of Conceptual art s social effectiveness in the world.

In analyzing the concept of art as the content of the work of art, Ian gives it the same philosophical and metaphysically foundational status as, for example, Marx's economic analysis of neoclassical economics or Frege's conceptual analysis of a concept. All three use the tools of the discipline in question to examine and criticize the content, form or practice of the discipline itself. There's the same self-reflexive element in most of the great philosophical investigations in 19th- and 20th-century thought, and I think Conceptual art needs to take its place among those deeper traditions.

Then there are, of course, the practical implications. I've argued elsewhere that if you can use any medium whatsoever, and if you think self-reflexively, self-consciously, about the implications of what you're doing, it's simply not possible to choose to make the work of art without being confronted with questions about its consequences within the world and the necessity of taking responsibility for them. What one ends up with is the necessity for reflection on one's own circumstances, and the status and meaning of one's practice as an artist.(7) This leads to a very different picture of the artist as a responsible agent, as a social agent effecting

political change in the world. In fact both of those elements were very central to Ian's own practice.

What I want to suggest is that if Ian really was committed to Conceptual art in this sense, he should have done pretty much exactly as he did. Conceptual art should have led him to political reflection on his own status as an artist in the international scene, as a white male and as an Australian. It should have led him to consequent political action which was guided by that reflection, and was dedicated to effective social change. That is exactly what this brand of Conceptual art would require. And that is exactly what Ian did.

Burn's Conceptual Objects

When you go through the body of Ian's work, both objects and essays, with an eye to content, certain overriding themes appear in just about all of it! from 1965 to the end. He's always working with the distinction between cognition--intellectual discrimination and analysis--on the one hand and visual perception on the other. There's always an interest in the influence of cognition on perception: how our interpretation affects or changes what we see. And he's very often engaged with using cognitive interpretation to guide and redirect the way we see things. This is, of course. clearest in his written work, but it's present in his work with objects as well. Then he frequently experiments with shifts between looking at something and looking through it--as if in search of a distant, perspectival horizon. He's also interested in reflection. There are lots of shiny, translucent or transparent surfaces in Ian's work that make us focus back and forth between an object, what's beyond it and what's in front of it--namely us. And all the focusing is under the guidance of cognition of some systematic interpretation of what it is we're seeing.

For example, in many of Ian's early paintings he's experimenting with strategies for disentangling perception from cognition. He offers us conceptual systems for perceiving things differently--in a different temporal order, maybe, or in a different instinctive order. Take Re-ordered Painting from 1965. Here Ian divides a nearly square canvas into six flat, hard-edged, quasi-organic shapes, with a number from 1 to 6 stenciled on each shape in a different color. The organic shapes lead us to perceive them in a particular sequence; i.e., we instinctively look first for the shapes that resemble human heads. But Ian superimposes on those shapes a competing, noninstinctive, numerical ordering.

Or take his Left to Right Painting, also from 1965. This one is a horizontal rectangle divided into vertical bands of color of different widths--from bright red to dark pink to dark gray to black, moving from left to right. Here he's giving us a break, in that the instinctive perceptual sequence of these colors--left to right--is the same as the cognitive sequence for reading Indo-European languages like English. In his Blue Premiss, No. 2 from 1966-67, he gives us a vertical dark blue rectangle divided by light blue lines into nine horizontal rectangles. The cognitive system for perceiving the series of ruled parts of the painting is now completely detached from the painting itself, and exists separately as a diagram hung next to it on the wall. So you read the diagram, remember the system and then perceive each part of the painting in light of it.

In the works that follow, Ian uses cognitive analysis reflexively, to redirect the viewer's perception back to her or his own situation. The status and circumstance of the self (particularly the artist's self) is one of the central themes that runs through the body of Ian's work. For example Blue Reflex from 1966-67 is a painting whose only express function is to reflect the viewer from the blue lacquered surface. Similarly with the Mirror Piece of 1967, which raises the question of what "self-reflection" means. In this work we find a horizontal sequence of 13 framed pages of notes and diagrams concerning the reflection and refraction of light relative to a mirror under different circumstances. At the end of the sequence is a slightly larger plain, framed mirror. Now, my instinctive perceptual relation to a mirror is its reflection of me. If it's framed in a gallery, I tend to modify that perception according to my conception of it as an art object. But by presenting a cognitive system that's independent of both frames of reference Ian disentangles the mirror from its conventional meanings almost completely. Notice that at this point he's working with objects fabricated by other people. That continues, although not exclusively, all the way until his last series, "Artists Think."

In Looking Through a Piece of Glass from 1967-68, he constructs a horizontal rectangular box with painted wood frames that hold glass panels on all sides but the rear. On the rear, painted panel there is white lettering that says "LOOKING THROUGH A PIECE OF

GLASS." Again you get a conflict between looking at the front surface, looking at your reflection in the front surface, and looking through the front surface to the rear surface on which is a text that refers to the act of looking at that text through the front surface. So now he's starting to recombine the cognitive and perceptual elements he was earlier disentangling from one another, experimenting and playing with them, and with our cognitive and perceptual limitations.

Ian then moves on to what you might call the metalevel, where he takes as a target of analysis objects made by other people which are already theory-laden by function or context, specifically objects that have already been conceptualized as art. Now you have two strategic strands in his thinking that are starting to come together: the idea of reconceptualizing a perceptual object according to some different cognitive system, and self-reflexive scrutiny of the viewer's own preconceptions.

Take his Photographic Mirror (Referential Line: Sol LeWitt), a sequence of seven photographs from 1967-68. The object in question is a Sol LeWitt sculpture, a series of open-sided cubes constructed from wood frames painted white and placed on a floor grid. LeWitt's work is conceptualized not only as art but more specifically according to a complex permutational system. But what Ian's photographs of it show is that you can't obtain a complete idea of the entire system by simply perceiving it, because when you circle around it in order to see the whole piece, you can only get what's perceptually available from each particular location. As you're walking around it, you're never seeing the thing as it is in itself. You're always seeing perspectives on it, and the perspectives are determined not only by the system that inheres in the piece but also by the expectations you bring to it as a viewer.

In Systematically Altered Photograph: The Suburbs, from 1968, Ian takes a photograph, apparently from an international brochure promoting tourism to Australia, that depicts a clean, bright, orderly Anglo-Australian neighborhood street. He proceeds to divest the photograph of meaning: he photocopies it then photocopies the photocopies, and so on, until the image is almost impossible to read. Through repetition it's reduced to an almost completely abstract pattern of lines and dots. So although he's still using prefabricated, conventionally conceptualized objects--here one with a graphic-arts lineage--he's now moving outside the art gallery context per se. He's working with popular media reproductions and technology, and with explicitly social content, a set of concerns that he later comes back to.

I also think it's important that he chose an image that can be seen as a kind of landscape. Early on, as a student, he was very involved with landscape painting. But here he chooses a setting that is full of the marks of settlement, in a way that gives the image an impersonal, generic character. It could be anywhere--Sydney, San Diego, Miami. What Ian makes sure you don't get from this image is the expected idyllic, pastoral image of landscape that gives the viewer a sense of personal connection to the land. Instead you get an image of colonization, of territory claimed by the prefabricated and impersonal architecture of a Westernized family neighborhood. These are concerns that he repeatedly revisits.

Shortly after he did this piece, Ian began to work with the Art & Language group and to do what he would describe as Conceptual art in the strict sense, where his theoretical writings function to cognitively redirect our experience of the entire art world. Now it's not just one object, it's not just one artist or one set of materials. It's the whole kit and kaboodle: all of the objects, all of the people, the institutions, the interactions. Now all of those transactions of money and power--the economic and social preconditions for producing an art work, and the effect of capitalism on it-come to occupy the focal point of the cognitive lens he's imposing. Ian's writings deserve a separate discussion, but I won't do that here. I'll just note the continuity of strategy and content: the focus on theory-laden art objects, the attempt to cognitively disentangle them from conventional and unreflective modes of interpretation, and the effort to redirect our thinking about them through conceptual analysis.

Australia and Art That Works

Ian carries all of these concerns with him when he returns to Australia in the late 1970s, and into his curatorial work with the Australian labor movement in the 1980s. He collaborates with working people in many different service and industrial jobs; they produce art works in traditional mediums, in a wide range of styles, that express their practical concerns and demands to other

workers and to management. He curates an exhibition titled "Working Art"--it could as well have been called "Art That Works" because of its effectiveness--in which he presents banners, posters and print publications in such a way as to redirect our thinking about political art, about traditional mediums and about the relationship between personal circumstance and choice of medium. And in this work he finds embodied certain values that he had formulated in his Art & Language work and even earlier.

For example, in his "working art" catalogue essay, he says, "[The] radical qualities of the art in this exhibition do not depend on any museum context or fine art criteria.(8) This is the point at which he finds the kind of work which successfully stands outside standard art-world criteria of value. It's a culmination of his progressive detachment of the object from the art environment conceptually and also experimentally in the actual works presented. He goes on, "Its primary audience is not a gallery-going audience; the art has a life outside the art gallery, and makes explicit its uses independent of any gallery setting."

This was a central concern of the work he did with the Art & Language group: the idea of transcending the art context, getting outside it completely. Here he's found a kind of art practice that does that, and has brought it back in as a new paradigm. Then he continues, "The ideal is a practice which doesn't privilege the artist as an individual creator, yet still demands an individual creative responsibility. It is a practice whose outcome must be vital to the labour movement, but also maintains a vitality in aesthetic terms. It is a practice which must be structurally a part of the trade union processes.(9) So he's found a kind of art practice that strikes the right kind of balance between individual artist and community, and overrides the distinction between art traditionally legitimated by the art world and art that has vitality and social consequence. These were all desiderata first clearly formulated in Ian's work with Art & Language.

But the importance of Ian's work here goes beyond its realization of the prior esthetic values he brought to it. Whereas in his earlier work with theory-laden art objects he was disentangling and distancing the object from the art context, here his stance is no longer one of circling around objects but rather of full engagement with them: with the workers who produce them, the conditions under which they produce them, and the social and political consequences of producing them. That is, his relationship to them is now personal rather than impersonal. He has a working role in relation to other worker artists. He sees and uses in a socially meaningful way his ability to legitimate this art and enhance its power through the conceptual analysis he brings to it--by curating, by writing, by getting us as viewers to rethink our relation to this art. He presents it in such a way as to cognitively disentangle it from our conventional presuppositions both about traditional mediums and about political art.

This was an important realization for many Conceptual artists in the 1970s and 1980s: that the criticism of artistic commodity production, plus a commitment to Conceptual art values, didn't necessarily equal a dead-end reductionism and rejection of objects that was so radical that there was nothing to do anymore but write and talk. What Ian saw was that when you have a personal, social and economic stake in art production as a fully engaged political subject, there's plenty to do. So then you just get to work and do it.

And with a personal, lived involvement with the social consequences of art production, plus an awareness of his ability to further legitimate it, comes Ian's own cognitive disentanglement of the importance and power traditional art mediums can have. Of the many compelling works exhibited in "Working Art," I'll mention just a few examples. There is a Newcastle Trades Centenary Banner done in 1985 as well as posters by the Combined Unions Against Racism, also from 1985, by the Federated Clerks' Union of Queensland, done in 1984, and by the New South Wales Teachers' Federation. And there's a cartoon from the AMIEU (Australasian Meat Industry Employees' Union) Newsletter from 1983. 1 hope this gives a sense of the diversity of people, activities, issues, mediums and styles he was dealing with. This is where I would argue that Ian recognizes the full scope of Conceptual art. He sees that these mediums, too, when put in the service of meaningful ideas that have important consequences in the world, are no less legitimate than any others. And this makes it possible for him to take them up again and use them himself.

The Territory of Art

So now Ian is beginning to have a strong sense of himself as a politically engaged, located agent, grounded in the same economic and

social relations that ground other workers. But you can see from the range of issues he was dealing with in curating "Working Art" that his conception of himself could not be merely economic and social, but also had to be gendered and racial, because he was being confronted constantly with workplace issues of sexism and racism, and with workers for whom these issues were survival matters of the most pressing urgency. It's not possible to have that kind of deep, personal involvement in the issues without being forced to discover and define who you are in relation to them.

It's not surprising that these concerns come together in his renewed interest in landscape and territory, in traditional styles and art mediums, and specifically in the work of Albert Namatjira, an Arandan Aboriginal painter of traditional landscapes in a semi-"Westernized" idiom. I think Ian had to find important Namatjira's vision, and the ways it had been misunderstood, because of the limitations and perspective of his own vision as a white, male Anglo-Australian with an inherently problematic relationship to the Australian continent. Kevin Gilbert, the Australian Aboriginal playwright, poet and painter, has this to say in his book Living Black:

The original Aboriginal people lived in a delicate ecological balance with their environment. This balance allowed them to follow a way of life that set them free from material burdens so that they could lead an extraordinarily rich spiritual life. The traditional Aboriginal was drunk on religion, intoxicated by the metaphysics expressed through the physical features of his land.

The European invasion quickly destroyed the balance between Aboriginal and nature as the land was taken and the ecology altered by the introduction of cattle and sheep. Nomadic hunting became impossible and as the physical conditions of Aboriginal life altered so sickness increased especially as the Aborigines had no resistance to the diseases introduced by the Europeans. The loss of land meant the loss of a metaphysics, too because the two were inextricable.(10)

In Systematically Altered Photograph: The Suburbs from 1968, Ian had already called into question the colonized European representation of the Australian landscape. And he explicitly describes the political function of European-style landscape painting in Australia as an "iconography of rapprochement with the land, which also symbolized the absence of traditional owners, [anal went hand in hand with the physical displacement of Aboriginal people from their land."(11)

Namatjira's landscape watercolors from the late 1940s had been prejudicially dismissed as kitsch, as poor imitations of European art. In his writing about Namatjira, Ian and Ann Stephen analyze these landscapes as ways of reclaiming from the European possessive pastoral tradition the territory that in fact belonged to Namatjira's own people, and as ways of masking and protecting the symbolic and metaphysical meaning of that territory by mimicking Western representational traditions. Historian Henry Reynolds published the first major study of Australian Aboriginal resistance to the European in invasion of their continent. Here's what he has to say about the Aboriginal view of land ownership:

While conflict was ubiquitous in traditional societies territorial conquest was virtually unknown. Alienation of land was not only unthinkable, it was literally impossible. If blacks often did not react to the initial invasion of their country it was because they were not aware that it had taken place. They certainly did not believe that their land had suddenly ceased to belong to them and they to their land. The mere presence of Europeans no matter how threatening, could not uproot certainties so deeply implanted in Aboriginal custom and consciousness. The black owners may have been pushed aside but many refused to accept that they had been dispossessed: they never conceded the major premise of the invasion.(12)

Ian sees that Namatjira's watercolors make a statement of fact, in a language the European viewer can understand, about who owns the land represented. I think he realizes that Namatjira's example shows what the power of looking and representing can be under these circumstances. It's still possible to represent and appropriate, to own symbolically, conceptually and metaphysically, something that may have been subject to all sorts of legal restrictions as well as state-imposed force. Namatjira demonstrates ownership of the land by demonstrating knowledge of the land, as well as knowledge of the European representational idiom of possessing the land.

But even here Ian brings to bear, in the viewing of Namatjira's work, some of the same strategies of cognitive disentanglement he himself used in his own earlier object work. He points out, for example that "[t]o read these pictures comfortably we need to pre-

programme our eyes to move upwards from the bottom edge--that is, to self-consciously disturb our normal Western way of seeing."(13) Notice the echoes here of Re-ordered Painting, from 1965. And he says, "Looking again at Namatjira s picture, the self-conscious effort of pushing our eyes up into the landscape seems to make the scene more real, suggestive of being in the landscape rather than outside, detached and contemplating it."(14) There are additional echoes here of Looking Through a Piece of Glass from 1967-68, as well as references to his personal evolution from detachment to involvement in Australia's social and natural landscape.

Given all this, it is in a way no surprise that Ian then revisits and squarely confronts the issue of landscape and territory as a central concern of his own work, and indeed in terms of the traditional medium of landscape painting. What else could he do, as a politically conscious and engaged white, male Anglo-Australian? The issue of the ownership of territory was virtually forced on him by the trajectory of his own artistic development. It would not have been possible for him at this point even to look at the scenery around him without a theory-laden, cognitive understanding of what it meant for him to look and represent as an act of appropriation.

But at the same time that the issue of landscape had to be a compelling concern for him personally, it also had to put him in an extremely difficult position. For one thing, in questioning Anglo-Australian ownership of the continent, he was implicitly questioning his own right to exist on it, and the right of his culture to exist on it. So he could expect a lot of resistance and accusations of betraying his own.(15) But he was also getting himself in trouble from a different direction. By articulating a position on land rights critical of Anglo-Australian hegemony and favorable to Aboriginal claims, he could be accused of presuming to speak for a community to which he didn't belong. From his work on a variety of issues in the labor movement, I think we can expect him to have been quite sensitive to this side of the question as well.

So here is an issue which, on the one hand, he had to address; on the other, he had to be circumspect and sensitive--completely self-reflective, really--about the position from which he addressed it, how he addressed it, and what he said. I see him in all of his late work inching forward very carefully toward his own solution to the problem of how to name and how to articulate the political, social, economic and esthetic position he finds himself in as a fully situated and fully engaged Anglo-Australian white male.

His "Value-Added Landscapes" of the early '90's are based on amateur landscape paintings which he bought from thrift shops. Some of them are signed, and some aren't; some are more "pastoral" looking than others. Value-Added Landscape #5 (1992), for instance, has about it the sparse, dry look of the central Australian continent, whereas Value-Added Landscape #8 (1992) is more conventional-looking. With all of these works, Ian mounts the paintings and then superimposes over them a sheet of transparent Plexiglas bearing his own textual commentary, in such a way that the visual integrity of the original canvas is not disrupted.

Here you can see how he's recapitulating some of the same strategies of cognitive and perceptual disentanglement he used in such earlier works as Looking Through a Piece of Glass. And he's also reaffirming and legitimating the use of traditional mediums in the service of political concepts: he's "adding value" to these landscapes by buying them, by recognizing (literally re-cognizing) them, by writing about them. In the end this reaffirms his own valuation of this kind of work. In all of these pieces I m struck by the sense in which all of the superimposed texts contain a combination of lyrical description of physical and natural forms, full of poetic metaphor and allusion, and also a certain quite harsh and vivid political vocabulary that suggests the underlying dynamics of territoriality. There is talk of unmediated reality, of patriarchal effects ascendant; there is talk of guilt, of competencies, appreciation, globalization, silences. He's finding a way to articulate the inherent ambivalence and conflict within his own perspective as a viewer: the conflict between its patriarchal and colonial presuppositions, and his increasingly sensitive, sophisticated and informed political sympathies. This is exactly where a commitment to follow out the radical implications of Conceptual art should have led him.

I'd like to close by reconsidering Ian's specific arguments that Conceptual art failed because of its irresolvable contradictions, in light of the demonstrable unity and consistency of his own practice as a Conceptual artist. In his essay "The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath," he asks, "How long can you use mass media forms before becoming aware of the political and economic functioning of mass media in a capitalist society?"(16) I think Ian provides an answer to that question in his own practice. He uses books, catalogues, posters and prints as an antidote to the one-dimensional capitalist representations of working conditions. The answer he gives is that you use

mass media forms in order to change the political and economic functioning of mass media in a capitalist society. Nothing about Conceptual art in this broad sense precludes using capitalist tools to undermine capitalism, which is essentially what he was doing.

Then he goes on to ask, "How long do you need to work collectively before realizing that genuinely collective work is antagonistic to the social relations of a capitalist society?" To that I would say, well, yes, fan, that's exactly right; and that's why his collective work with the labor movement and his "collaborations" with unknown landscape painters are so effective--because of their antagonism to social relations within capitalism. We can agree that Conceptual art may have been generated historically by capitalist society, but that doesn't mean that its ideology and strategies are dependent on capitalist society.

And then he queries, "How long can you give expression to your most personal feelings within an alienating market structure before realizing you are also alienating your own personal feelings?" And here the solution would be to drop out of that market structure, which is exactly what Ian did. One reason that the implications of Conceptual art are so radical is precisely because in the end they require abandoning the market that made Conceptual art possible--kicking out the ladder from under you once you reach the top. That's not an easy thing to do. But Ian did it, and he remained true to his principles. Instead of the market, he utilized direct political action as a medium for executing in practice the concepts that concerned him. This enabled him to reestablish personal relations both with other workers and also with traditional art mediums. That reconnection then made it possible for him to return to traditional mediums in his own work, and, in the final series, "Artists Think, to himself as a landscape painter.

Finally he asks, "After you realize that the market can operate by selling ideas just as readily as it sells objects as commodities, how long can you continue to believe you are being subversive toward the market?" Well, Ian, you can buy and sell ideas that subvert the buying and selling of ideas--just as you did with the "Value-Added Landscapes." Of course in the short term they become more marketable because of the imprimatur of his collaboration. But what they market is a very subversive idea who owns the territory, who owns the environment and the land on which that market ultimately depends.

Now Ian wrote these criticisms of Conceptual art in 1981, before he started going into this later part of his won production. He had not yet executed the art which, I have argued, resolves these problems. Even when he did start doing this work, he may not have conceived himself in the way I'm suggesting, as extending his Conceptual art practice into the political realm where I claim it inevitably leads. So he may not have conceived himself as solving the problems he raised for Conceptual art. But I would suggest that in point of fact he did solve those problems nevertheless.

(1.) Ian burn, Dialogue: Writings in Art History, North Sydney, New South Wales, Allen and Unwin, 1991, pp. 115, 119. Italics in original.

(2.) Ian Burn, "Conceptual Art as Art," in Burn, Dialogue, p. 125.

(3.) Ibid, p. 130.

(4.) Ian Burn, "The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath (or the memoirs of an ex-Conceptual artist)," in Burn, Dialogue, p. 114.

(5.) Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Artforum, vol. 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967), pp. 79-80.

(6.) Ibid.

(7.) Adrian Piper, "The Logic of Modernism," Flash Art, vol. 26, no. 168, January/February 1993, pp. 56-58, 118, 136. Reprinted in Piper, Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996.

(8.) Working Art: A Survey of Art in the Australian Labour Movement in the 1980s, Sydney, New South Wales. Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985, p. 9.

(9.) Ibid, pp. 10-11.

(10.) Kevin Gilbert, Living Black, Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin Books Australia Ltd. 1978, p. 2.

(11.) Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, "Namatjira;s White Mask: A Partial Interpretation," in Jane Hardy, J.V.S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw, eds., The Heritage of Namatjira, Port Melbourne, Victoria, William Heinemann Australia, 1992, p. 266.

(12.) Henry Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia, Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1982, p. 65.

(13.) Burn and Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask: A Partial Interpretation," p. 269.

(14.) Ibid. Italics in original text.

(15.) Here's Kevin Gilbert again: "Aboriginals know that there is enormous reluctance on the part of most white Australians to allow even theoretical acquiescence to the idea of Aboriginal land rights, inflaming as it does the memory of past guilt and the territorial fears of the uninformed. This is so even when it is difficult to see that any competing interests would suffer very much; after all even the scrappiest few acres anywhere can at least run a few spare cattle and so add something to the income or the convenience of some grazier. It is as though something in the collective psyche of white society shrinks from giving Aborigines this symbol of their long ignored human rights. Even when Aborigines are, grudgingly, given a few acres it will be lease, not freehold; it will be saleable, not given to the Aboriginal people as a whole and in perpetuity; and it will be subject to ministerial veto. The list is endless. How much greater will the resistance be when the idea of Aboriginal land rights threatens immediate interests, particularly those of pastoralists and mining companies?" Gilbert, Living Black, p. 269.

(16.) Burn, "The 1960s" Crisis and Aftermath," p. 118.