

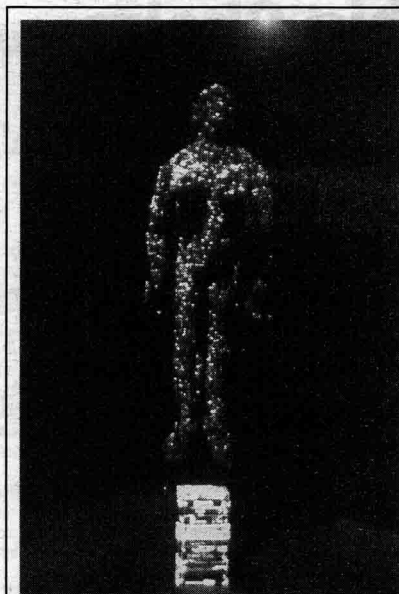
# Artful protest

Julia Jones reviews the tradition of environmentalist art in Australia

Australian artists have for many years expressed their concern for the environment. Take for example Arthur Streeton's *Silvan Dam and Mount Donna Buang*, AD 2000, painted in 1940, and now recognisable as a prophetic vision of the barrenness which accompanies the clear-felling of a native forest. Unbeknown to Streeton at the time he painted the work, the year 2000 would become a focus for environmental concerns in Australia, with the staging of the 'Green' Olympic Games in Sydney and an increased eco-consciousness compelled by this impending watershed. In the run-up to 2000, the bi-annual flagship exhibition of Australian contemporary art has undertaken a major shift in keeping with this focus.

How is 'Nature' to be regarded in the 1990s? What role can art play in relation to environmental issues? Can art create positive change? How do environmental action groups relate to art? If art should be, as the artist John Wolseley recently declared, "about the way we live", then the subject of this year's *Perspecta* is timely in the sense that "the way that we live"—or more specifically the impact of human society on the environment—is the most pressing issue facing us in the late twentieth century. By interrogating nature through art and vice versa, *Perspecta* has the potential to stimulate thought, discussion and action: art can, for instance, take the approach of raising awareness through imagery, presenting practical visual solutions, and/or incorporating positive action, such as regeneration, into the actual process of the work. One salient example of the power of imagery to move political ends in recent Australian history is the galvanising force of Peter Dombrovskis' photograph *Rock Island Bend* of the Gordon-below-Franklin river, which featured in a Labor Party campaign poster in 1983 accompanied by the caption "Could you vote for a party that will destroy this?" As Greens leader Bob Brown has noted, "It was the right picture at the right time. And it was crucial in saving the Franklin". The 'No Dams' campaign signified a turning point in public awareness of environmental issues in Australia, and an evocative image was at its centre.

An example of environmentalist art a little farther from home might be found with Joseph Beuys, a founding member of the German Green Party, and his work for



Fiona Hall's new work for *Perspecta* continues her exploration of the body and its intersection with junk culture. *Slash and Burn* comprises a series of life-size body fragments, including heads and limbs, which the artist has knitted from video tape and suspended in a darkened room on simple frames to achieve a fully-formed yet lifeless look. Hall has specifically chosen to knit video tapes of war films, fictional representations of actual wars such as the First and Second World Wars, the Vietnam War and the war between European settlers and native Americans, her titles including *Apocalypse Now* and *Gallipoli*. The video cases form an integral part of the work; they sit in a regimental grid on the floor, underneath the body part they have helped create, their remaining tape tugging at the severed limb with the insistence of an umbilical cord. Their configuration might evoke military precision as much as a cemetery for the war dead. Hall has knitted each of these pieces herself, a reflection of both her concern for process—a means of entering into the meditative state created by repetitive but intimate manual labour—and for investing the work with the personal attention of one's own hand. At the same time, of course, the work also is testament to the artist's outstanding technical skill, a trademark which has no doubt enhanced Hall's popular appeal. Knitting is also important to the artist as archetypal 'women's work', long devalued as such. She seeks to counterpoise this personal, time-invested travail with the archetypal male labour of war. While she states that this piece is not so directly concerned with gender issues as some of her previous work—for instance, she does not intend for the heads to be read as male, but hopes that the differences in size and shape might evoke the fact that everyone suffers in war—yet she also affirms that "if I wasn't female I wouldn't be making this work". The popular cultural obsession with war, as symbolised by the endless stream of war films Hall encountered while making the work, led her to suspect a certain masculine imperative, or as she puts it, necessity, for war, and indeed for its continual re-enactment. In contrast to the spectacular histrionics of the war movie, Hall posits a quiet, reverential space where the very material of these virtual replays of war—video-tape—has been sequestered for personal mourning and memorial.

Jacqueline Millner

Fiona Hall's *Slash and Burn* forms part of the *Perspecta* exhibition *Websitesat* at the AGNSW from August 2-September 14, along with works by Simryn Gill, Stephen Holland, the Arnhem Land Weavers and Lauren Berkowitz.

Fiona Hall, *Slash and Burn* (detail)

Documenta 1985. Beuys placed hundreds of rocks outside a museum and challenged the German city of Kassel to plant one tree for every rock. Each time a tree was planted, a rock was planted with it. Kassel now has many more trees than it did before Beuys' challenge. Other German cities did not take up the challenge, and the rocks left over are a constant reminder of the trees that were not planted.

Art as activism is championed by Suzi Gablik in *The Re-enchantment of Art*, where she writes, "I believe that what we will see in the next few years is a new paradigm based on the notion of participation, in which art will begin to redefine itself in terms of social relatedness and ecological healing, so that artists will gravitate toward different activities, attitudes and roles than those that operated under the aesthetics of modernism" (Gablik, Suzi, *The Re-enchantment of Art*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1991). This prediction finds an echo in Sydney artist Jennifer Turpin's suggestion that artists work in collaboration with environmental organisations, as she and Michaelie Crawford have done with the Australian Conservation Foundation. The artists' project *Memory Line* is a symbolic restoration of the original route of a creek at Fairfield. A winding pathway of tall grass, its aim is to raise awareness of the natural formation of the creek's route, which contrasts strongly with the concrete drain through which the water has been channelled.

Speaking at a developmental symposium for *Perspecta* in February 1996, Turpin observed that an artist can step sideways to offer a new way of looking at an environmental problem,

and can assist in communicating such concerns to the wider public. In response, Anne-Marie Willis, writer and researcher with the Ecodesign Foundation, proposed another step—to go into these situations and no longer consider oneself an artist. The Ecodesign Foundation proposes creating new strategies through imagery accompanied by discussion and written comment, and declares that imagery needs to present practical solutions. Its recent project *Waste not Waste* (1996) included Samantha Donnelly's and Helen Pynor's construction *Mapping: Motions—'You have erased me, without memory'*. This work comments on the treatment of human faeces as waste and presents practical alternatives to the flushing of digested organic matter into sewerage and out to sea. The construction includes a set of small metal boxes filled with composted human faeces in which plants grow, offering an environmental and practical solution to the disposal of human 'waste'. The Ecodesign Foundation does not categorise the objects created for *Waste Not Waste* as 'art'; rather, these objects were intended to be "supplemented with conversation, to be written about and written over, to be appropriated, recycled and used in other ways". As Tony Fry comments, "Contrary to initial appearances, the objects should be regarded as means not ends... Rather than the created, the made, these objects were brought into existence in order to re-create, remake" (Fry, Tony, and Willis, Anne-Marie eds, *Waste not Waste*, Ecodesign Foundation, Rozelle, Sydney, 1996).

Another strategy might be that employed by environmental activist groups that have used visual imagery extensively in their campaigns—in protests, media promotions, merchandising and exhibitions. Certain imagery can embody the identity of a particular group. The Wilderness Society is well-known for its trademark picturesque wilderness photographs. While simple images, these photographs make a strong statement by showing the magnificent areas of wilderness that could be lost forever. Exhibitions are another way of conveying messages through imagery, for example The Wilderness Society's recent *Dugongs of Hinchinbrook*, June 21-July 6, which featured the work of 100 artists in response to the battle to save Port Hinchinbrook from the damage of large-scale development. Exhibitions such as this promote public awareness of environmental concerns through artwork, information and campaign material, and also provide a much-needed fundraising opportunity for the

cause. The 1996 Greenpeace art prize exhibition *The Environment and Me*, took the ecological theme one step further and encouraged exhibitors to reflect it not only in the subject matter of their work but also in the materials used. The winning entry, Ziv Cohen's sculpture *Trap No More*, is a protest against the overfishing of lobsters and comprised found and recycled materials, including a large rusty lobster pot.

Of course, Greenpeace are less renowned for their genteel art shows than their dramatic media events, which illustrate another powerful blending of art and protest. As Charles Zuber has suggested, Greenpeace activists "could be thought of as performance artists, producing challenging theatre pieces enacted with the involvement of mass media. Guerrilla tactic as an artform. Culture standing on the side of nature" (Zuber, Charles, "Re-working priorities: recycling materials," *Artlink*, December 1991). The media 'actions' of the organisation certainly live up to this statement. The image of the Greenpeace activist in a tiny boat floating in front of an enormous ship is a familiar one, and was employed in a series of actions held around Australia in protest against the Bicentennial Naval Review in 1988. An action in September 1990 saw the entire front courtyard of the Japanese Embassy in Canberra wrapped in 700 metres of driftnet to draw public attention to the use of this destructive fishing method by Japanese fleets. In March 1995 the Queen Victoria statue in Sydney's CBD was equipped with a gas mask to protest against the North-Western Sydney M2 tollway.

Whether art responds to environmental crisis by raising awareness, actively creating change, or presenting visual solutions, all are important approaches. Whether or not this imagery is known as 'art' is of little consequence. What is important is what art can be. *Perspecta* has the potential to stimulate ideas and discussion on the role and nature of art which deals with environmental concerns. And, in the process of this cultural examination, this wide-ranging event can continue to focus attention on one of the most important political issues of our time.

Julia Jones has recently researched the nature of visual imagery relating to the destruction of Australia's natural environment, focusing on the 1970s onwards. This year she has worked at The Sir Hermann Black Gallery, University of Sydney, and as a research assistant on *Perspecta*.



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