

Biography after Conceptualism - Ann Stephen: On Looking at Looking: The Art & Politics of Ian Burn

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Susan Best,

Biography after Conceptualism. Ann Stephen's *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn*

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John Stringer referred to Ian Burn in a catalogue essay from 1992 as having the “unique distinction of being the only Australian ever to be central to an internationally significant art movement.”ⁱ The art movement is, of course, Conceptual Art and in particular Burn's work from 1970-1977 with the most ascetic and cerebral group of conceptualists, Art & Language. Despite this international significance, Burn is not well known outside the contemporary art world as Ann Stephen notes in her recently published book, *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn*. Hopefully, Stephen's very engaging book will redress this anomaly and bring the work and the ideas of one of our very few internationally renowned artists to the attention of a much larger audience.

On Looking at Looking is a hard book to characterise or categorise. It is a kind of hybrid, at once biography and monograph, yet not really properly conforming to either genre.

This unusual form addresses the difficulty of fitting Burn's life and work into the typical modes of art/life documentation. The typical assumptions about the artist, and his or her originality, which usually shape such genres of art writing run counter to Burn's aims and methods, and those of conceptual art more generally. Conceptual art, like minimalism before it, rejected the expressive view of art and the psychobiographical link between art

and artist that usually underpins this approach to the function of art. Stephen's brilliant solution to the challenges of producing an account of the life of an individual conceptual artist is to allow 'the working life' to unfold roughly chronologically—hence the book has the kind of readability and engaging narrative pull of biography—but to construct the narrative from a series of dialogues: Burn and Australian landscape, Burn and the self-portrait, Burn and modernism, Burn and abstraction, and so forth. This solution, as Stephen notes, "circumvents the inevitable individualism and chronology of biography" while also reflecting the way the artist himself thought about art as a collaborative enterprise. Burn defined art:

... as a collective enterprise, with artists always building on other artist's work... appropriation as an artistic strategy... allows your work to talk to other artists' work and simultaneously to talk about the other artists' work. In a more pragmatic world, isn't that what constitutes originality anyway? (8)

In keeping with this modest (or postmodernist) view of originality, no attempt is made by Stephen to formulate an in depth account of Burn's unique personality, nor to give personal explanations for the trajectory of his art. This is not to say that the book is without psychological insight, one does get a very strong sense of Burn the man, alongside Burn the ambitious young artist, and Burn the ex-conceptual artist cum political activist. These insights are often delivered in brief snatches such as this, "Ian was distinctly nondescript in appearance which was consistent with his obsession with the bland and the ordinary"(183). As this example indicates, a very clear picture of

Burn's particularity as a person is given, even, paradoxically, as individuality is something evaded or eschewed.

The specificity of Burn's life as an internationally successful artist, however, is much more deliberately downplayed. For example, Stephen refers to Burn's artistic career as representative of a cultural position on the margins, rather than unique. She describes Burn's biography "as a parable for how artists in cultures like Australia encounter modernism" and argues that there "is nothing unique about his journey from obscure regional origins to the cosmopolitan center of art" She concludes: "The lesson of his adventure in the midst of New York Conceptual art, and how striking it is, was that he could not annihilate his past nor forget his 'provincial' origins"(1-2). This might sound like the dead hand of cultural constructivism, the artist as mere avatar of the provincialism problem, however, Stephen, like Burn himself, is equally concerned with the way in which context or social conditions etch into the possibilities and capacities of an individual figure, as with the way in which the individual, in turn, might act upon those conditions.

This latter movement towards more direct political engagement is the sudden jump in Burn's career that further disrupts the usual trajectory of the artist's monograph. Burn's contributions to international art ceased after his return to Australia from New York in 1977. In his subsequent work, briefly teaching and then working with unions, Stephen points to the continuities that subsist despite this dramatic change of direction. For example, when Burn applied for the position as director of the Sydney University Art

Workshop, his application proposed a shift in art education philosophy from art as self-expression to “the production of visual images and structures... as a social process which involves the artist in a critical relation to his or her environment and culture” (184). This summation of Burn’s conceptual art strategy, so succinctly articulated here, surprisingly perhaps, can also be applied to the business of representing unions, as well as his late ‘secret’ works with text overlaid on amateur paintings of landscape.

This intertwining of seemingly disparate concerns also informs what might be termed the height of Burn’s career. In traditional monographs, works such as *Soft-Tape* (1966), conceived with Mel Ramsden, or Burn’s *Mirror Piece* (1967), might be characterised as breakthrough works, which display Burn’s ‘own’ internationally recognised idiom (if this isn’t already a contradiction in terms for the impersonal, affectless mode of expression of this kind of conceptual art). Stephen, however, links such works to Burn’s earliest concerns with perception and his insights into how perception depends on position, and by implication one’s geographical and cultural positioning. One of the key issues Stephen pursues is precisely this uncovering of how Burn’s contributions to avant-garde practice can be read as inflected by provincial insights.

It is the extraordinarily deft, delicate and subtle balance of such seemingly irreconcilable concerns that makes *On Looking at Looking* a truly remarkable and enjoyable book. In particular, the combination of biography and monograph is a lesson in how to do biography after conceptual art. It is perhaps an unnoticed legacy of conceptual art that so few contemporary monographs today include much biographical information on the

artist. And yet so often, unnoticed aspects of a work can be revealed or underlined by small glimpses of the artist's personality, even when personality is intentionally bracketed or supposedly suppressed. Certainly, Burn's professed love of the bland and the ordinary provides other terms or another way to look at and describe his crisp, austere aesthetic. Such intersections of language and perception are at the heart of Burn's work, and his work continues to provide a model for thinking about such issues. In turn, Stephen provides a way forward for thinking about the legacy of conceptual art and in particular, her book addresses the challenge of writing about the strange conundrum of non-expressive individuality.

ⁱ Stringer cited in Ann Stephen, *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2006) 222 fn 10.