

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

1984
AN AUSTRALIAN
ACCENT



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PROJECT

An Australian Accent

15 April – 10 June 1984
P.S.1, New York

30 June – 26 August 1984
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC

22 September – 11 November 1984
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

1 December 1984 – 31 January 1985
Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney

I have invited leading artists from the United States and Europe to work in Australia and thereby create an awareness of international contemporary art. Stimulated by the recent energy and direction Australian art has taken, I undertook this exhibition to do the reverse; to bring an Australian exhibition to New York accompanied by the artists whose work will be shown.

John Kaldor in Daniel Thomas (ed), *An Australian accent: three artists: Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, Ken Unsworth*, exhibition catalogue, John Kaldor Art Projects, Sydney 1984, p 8

KEN UNSWORTH

Installation view of Unsworth's works
in **An Australian Accent** at P.S.1 in
New York in 1984

Photo: Andrew Moore
Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects



MIKE PARR

Installation view of Parr's works
in **An Australian Accent** at P.S. 1
in New York in 1984

Photo: Andrew Moore
Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects



1984 AN AUSTRALIAN ACCENT

INTRODUCTION

Since the middle of the 20th century, New York has been the sounding board of our global village. The Big Apple is host, banker and tastemaker for much of the Western world – as a city, and as home to some of the great museums and galleries, from the monster Metropolitan Museum of Art to the commercial galleries of SoHo and, more recently, Chelsea. The entire world of art can be seen in New York, and probably in a more rounded and complete way than anywhere else. In 1984, John Kaldor made what was then a bold move, curating an exhibition of three Australian artists in that great metropolis. Would these artists – Mike Parr, Imants Tillers and Ken Unsworth – transfix the critics, bring ‘the land down under’ into dramatic focus, and help spark a new narrative about recent Australian art?

ARTIST

Mike Parr

born 1945 in Sydney, Australia
lives and works in Sydney

Mike Parr has built a special place for himself in Australian art history. In 1970, he helped organise Inhibodress, the first artist-run space in the country; through the 1980s, he helped internationalise Australian art; while his own work has deepened the history of self-contemplative art (begun around 1629 with Rembrandt). Widely known as a performance artist, Parr’s videos, drawings, photographs and other works play out obsessive themes: the illusion of control by the language of art (photography, the alphabet, the perspective corridor, the editing machine, the self as a container of likeness) and the real threat of collapse in that control. The overall effect is this contest between hallucinatory omnipotence and the uncontrollability of reality; a body of work that underlines the fact that, as an experience, art puts power and powerlessness together like nothing else.

Imants Tillers

born 1950 in Sydney, Australia
lives and works in Cooma, Australia

In many ways Imants Tillers is less a painter of paintings, than a diagnostician of the image. With other artists of his generation such as Peter Tyndall, John Nixon, Lindy Lee, Robert Macpherson, Dale Frank, Janet Burchill and John Young, he could be said to belong to a school of ‘conceptual painting’ or deconstructive painting. His aesthetic literacy, and his sensitivity to art-historical context, is formidable. A child of immigrant Latvian parents who met in a displaced person’s camp, Tillers grew up in Australia, but has been haunted by unthinkably complex causal lines, and how they intersect, in life and art. How chancy it is to be born in Australia, rather than Latvia or America, for example.

With his numbered canvas boards, grids and stacks, Tillers’ works come under a rule-governed generative system that proposes an infinite series. This is an ambitious project

reconciling life and art, which the artist called *One painting*, then the *Book of power*. It is like a parallel universe, or philosophical fiction, recalling Mallarmé’s concept of *The Book* (‘All the world exists to be enclosed in a book’), or Jorge Luis Borges’ idea of *The Library*.

Ken Unsworth

born 1931 in Bendigo, Australia
lives and works in Sydney, Australia

Ken Unsworth started as a painter but began making sculpture when he was working at Bathurst Teachers College in 1966. His oeuvre spans four decades in about seven different practices that have evolved simultaneously: site-specific land-based art, performance (with his own body used as a component in the presentation), motorised relief works, work with river stones (his *Suspended stone circle II* in the Art Gallery of NSW is one of Australia’s most popular public works), large bitumen drawings, maquettes, and room-sized installations.

Unsworth’s art is founded in the magic and mystery of hidden forces. No label – surrealist, expressionist, symbolist – quite accounts for its recurring emotional power. There are affinities with Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, Georg Baselitz and Louise Bourgeois. Often bitterly funny, his work mixes light and dark in ways that keep us off-balance.

PROJECT

Now an affiliate of the Museum of Modern Art, P.S.1 was founded in 1971 by Alanna Heiss as the Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc, devoted to organising exhibitions in under-utilised and abandoned spaces across New York City. It opened its first major exhibition in its permanent location in Long Island City, Queens, in 1976 with the seminal *Rooms*. Then executive director of P.S.1, Heiss had met John Kaldor in 1975, and knew him as a collector as well as the organiser of a series of artists’ projects. When Kaldor later proposed an exhibition, Heiss had already pondered such a show, but not, in her words, ‘a survey’, ‘a national advertisement’ or an ‘obscure trend’ exhibition. Kaldor researched for a year, and refined the exhibition from eight artists to three – Mike Parr, Imants Tillers and Ken Unsworth – presented more as three one-man shows combined, rather than as a group show.

In the early 1980s Australian film, music and literature were receiving international recognition but Australian visual art – which was enjoying a new burgeoning energy – had not been much shown in the United States. Indeed, *An Australian Accent* was the first time any of the three artists had shown in the US. Tillers showed his first *Stack* paintings and remembered that it really took his now-famous work with canvasboards much further. Parr made many new works, including a series of charcoal self-portraits. Unsworth presented large works drawn in bitumen and paint and a series of smaller drawings that included studies for his performance works.

When the exhibition opened in 1984 (following an opening night

The three artists involved, Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, and Ken Unsworth, are image makers (and, sometimes, image scavengers) of a driving, obsessional and visionary sort. Their pictures come freighted with dreams, often of a complex and disquieting kind, and the idioms employed allow of a rapid and comprehensive attack upon a vast range of problems – emotional, conceptual, esthetic and perceptual.

John Russell, 'Three vigorous artists from Down Under', *New York Times*, 20 April 1984

party hosted by Rupert Murdoch), it was so well received that the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC requested the exhibition and took down three rooms of the permanent collection to show it alongside *Expressions*, an exhibition of German artists including Jorg Immendorff, AR Penck, Markus Lupertz, Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer. Later, the show moved to the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth and the Art Gallery of NSW in Sydney.

Each of the three artists' works are now in Australian museums, including Tillers' *Pataphysical man* 1984 and Parr's *The Trojan(ed) horse (self portrait as a stage)* 1983–84 from the exhibition, which are now in the Art Gallery of NSW collection. In the book *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Parr remembered the show as 'a breakthrough, with a real impact in the United States', while at home – in Perth and Sydney – he recalled that it 'precipitated a major change in Australian art'.

WORLD EVENTS: 1984

- _ Apple Mac introduced with the Macintosh 128k
- _ CD-ROM introduced
- _ World's worst industrial disaster: a poison gas leak from the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, India
- _ William Gibson coins the term 'cyberspace' in his novel *Neuromancer*
- _ Joseph Beuys creates the work *I like America and America likes me*
- _ Surfwear company Mambo established, with strong graphics and self-deprecating Australian humour
- _ *Historic Futur*Fall: Excursions into Postmodernity* conference held at the University of Sydney
- _ Australia's National Association for the Visual Arts established
- _ Biennale of Sydney, *Private symbol: social metaphor*, artistic director Leon Paroissien
- _ **8th Kaldor project:** The work of three mid-career Australian artists – Mike Parr, Imants Tillers and Ken Unsworth – is exhibited in *An Australian Accent* at New York's P.S.1 gallery, followed by Washington DC's Corcoran Gallery of Art, Perth's Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Art Gallery of NSW

THEME

Regionalism vs internationalism

The centres of the art world, and the global art market, have traditionally been New York, Paris and London. The supremacy of these art capitals and their centralised powers of distribution have made other countries feel marginalised. Art historian and academic Terry Smith called it our 'provincialism problem' (*Artforum*, vol 13, no 1, Sept 1974, pp 54–59). The marketing of Australian art, from *Recent Australian painting* at the Whitechapel in London 1961 through to shows such as *Eureka: artists from Australia* at ICI London in 1982 and the 1984 Exxon International Exhibition, *Australian visions* at New York's Guggenheim have displayed a sense of gratitude and rejection, a cycle of cringe and strut, which became more marked towards the end of the 1980s.

Why? The 'tyranny of distance' was the famous phrase historian Geoffrey Blainey used in 1966 to describe the way Australia's geographical remoteness shaped the nation's history, with the country generally viewed as a British colonial outpost on the fringe of Asia. This 'furthest shore' of the New World was, of course, part of the historical narrative of a foreign consciousness – not so much a discovery as a projection. If Australia was the antipodes, this made Europe itself a site of presence.

The 'tyranny of distance' also meant that Australians growing up before the 1960s had to wait months for a new book, art magazine or hairstyle to arrive, until a new electronic sped-up age of super-high velocity airplanes and airwaves augured the death of distance. John Kaldor, according to curator Daniel Thomas in the catalogue for *An Australian Accent*, was 'the first to realise that the new 1960s global village existed in terms of transport and could be operated for Australia's benefit' (p 13). The annual Alcorso-Sekers Travelling Scholarship Award for Sculpture was one such initiative: flying in major avant-garde artists to make art in Australia. But it also came from Kaldor's own background. Born in Hungary, brought to Australia at 13, sent to England and Switzerland to learn about his parents' textile business, his work after 1970 took him to Sydney, New York, Paris, Tokyo.

Likewise, the artists in *An Australian Accent* have multicultural connections: Imants Tillers' background is Latvian; Mike Parr's wife is Austrian; Ken Unsworth's wife was Russian (born in Egypt). This, in fact, is contemporary life in Australia: today it's not the migrant who must assimilate to the Anglo world, but the Anglo who must come to terms with what has become the multicultural mainstream. As the song says 'We are one, but we are many' and a good deal of Australian art has drawn much of its energy from this square of oppositions: combining national coherence and ethnic diversity, conflict and identification, each desire sabotaging the other. And visual art could be viewed as a toolbox to expose these often unseen tensions, shifts and complications in society and the way it figures things out through representation.

The crowning form of nationalist ideology in the visual arts – that sense of ‘one’ – generally draws on the pastoralism of the 1890s, namely the iconic landscape works of Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. By the 1980s, among the conscience-knotted artists of the thirty to fortysomething age group – like Imants Tillers, Juan Davila, Tim Johnson and Gordon Bennett – Australia would be dealing perpetually with two shifting mirages: the European past and the Aboriginal past. There could be no dream of a fixed national identity so much as an identity called up and called into question.

By the mid 1980s, Paul Hogan’s film *Crocodile Dundee* reinforced the image of a macho pioneer tradition, misread as an earlier phase of US history. According to journalist Phillip Adams, it was also a clever marketing of innocence. Australians, so different in speech, physiognomy, attitude, were flavour of the month, but for being faux-naïf.

Imants Tillers’ work, especially, is a kind of X-ray negative of our ‘provincialism problem’, seeming to play out his migrant’s sense of struggle to establish speech and visibility from the disenfranchised spaces of the periphery. He saw that the tyranny of distance, and this problem of belatedness, with the regard to a centre could be turned to our advantage.

In ‘Fear of texture’ (*Art & Text*, no 10, 1983), Tillers proposed that in Australia we know our art from reproductions and so we are not beholden to American or European cultural centres. Our reliance on photomechanical reproduction made Australia postmodern by default. In *Untitled* 1978, using a computer-scanning process, he was able to produce his own version of *Summer* 1909 by Hans Heysen which, when reproduced on canvas with colour precision-ink jets, was indistinguishable from the reproduction of Heysen’s original. These two straight original-scale versions of *Summer* amounted to a doubled painting on canvas of a reproduction of a painting of a natural object. This is a kind of self-reflexive deconstruction that skewers the provincialism problem in a highly sophisticated manner.

It became clear by the 1980s that artists could come from anywhere: Aachen or Kinshasha, Geneva or Melbourne. Australia was part of a global economy, and multiculturalism was a social and historical fact. It would no longer be a matter for migrants to feel they were persecuted minorities – as it turned out, in the streets of Sydney or Adelaide, younger Australians were becoming more Italian, more Greek, more Aboriginal, in a sense that they craved the food, the street fashions, the styles. With each minority lifted from the margin to the spotlight, boldness followed, courage spurred by public attention. From the perceived position of disadvantage as Australian artists always on the margins of the global art world, Tillers, Parr and Unsworth hit the spotlight at P.S.1. With unerring instinct, John Kaldor picked the right time and the right place for this presentation of Australian art in New York. Completely deprovincialised, these artists – localised, metropolitan, cosmopolitan – no longer suffered the psychological difficulties that had made previous generations struggle with the idea of being an ‘Australian’ artist.

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

• Mike Parr (Australia, b1945)

The Trojan(ed) horse (self portrait as a stage) 1983–84

drawing: charcoal paste on photographic backdrop paper; 274 x 732 cm
Purchased 1985 194.1985.a-d

In his charcoal self-portraits, Parr placed his face on the left of a huge sheet of paper using the section to portray a slurred state of confusion, a tangle of automatic drawing. You can see these operating in this work, evoking a double desire: that of a controlling subject to be fully in command, to put everything into perspective, and also the desires of an aphasic and autistic self.

The map 1987 from the portfolio *Prints by twenty-five Australian artists: the bicentennial folio*

intaglio: etching, fowl biting; 64.6 x 45.6 cm platemark; 76.8 x 57.4 cm sheet
Purchased 1989 33.1989

Portrait of M & F 1996 (printed 2001)

gelatin silver photograph; 61 x 53.5 cm sheet
Gift of the artist 2001 103.2001

The wax bride 1998

mixed media; dimensions variable
Gift of the artist 2001 23.2001

• Imants Tillers (Australia, b1950)

Pataphysical man 1984

synthetic polymer paint, charcoal and pencil on 168 canvas boards; 304 x 532 cm
Ewan Murray-Will Bequest Fund 1985 1.1985.a-III

In *Pataphysical man*, images from magazines and books are rescaled, and transferred to grid squares. The work seems to be asking: where is where and why is where and who is where in this age of reprographic technology? The title comes from the proto-Dadaist poet Alfred Jarry’s ‘pataphysics’, a science of imaginary solutions. The main figure comes from a reproduction of a painting by Giorgio de Chirico, *The archeologist* 1926–27. Other images include drawings by the German cartoonist Wilhelm Busch and by Malevich, figures from Aboriginal rock paintings, illustrations from Carl Jung’s books on alchemy, and about 50 little drawings from a book of Latvian folk tales.

Conversations with the bride 1974–75

112 paintings (gouache, synthetic polymer paint on paper on aluminium),
112 aluminium tripods, 7 type C photographs; dimensions variable
Purchased 1976 235.1976.a-wwwwwwww

Monaro 1998

gouache, synthetic polymer paint on 288 canvas boards, nos 52594–52881;
305 x 853 cm overall
Patricia Lucille Bernard Bequest Fund and the Don Mitchell Bequest Fund 2005
340.2005.a-bbbbbbbbbbb

Two paintings, hidden from view

from the series *One painting* 1981–82

diptych: synthetic polymer paint on canvas; each panel 132.5 x 193 x 4 cm
Purchased 1984 122.1984.a-d

• **Ken Unsworth** (Australia, b1931)

Suspended stone circle II 1974–77, 1988

103 river stones, wire; 400 cm diameter overall

Purchased 1988 356.1988.a-yyyy

In Unsworth's installations we become children in Wonderland, with all the terrors and comforts of that time, trapped in empty rooms or twilight forests. Tricks of scale and lighting make things look like they're floating free. Installations like these are not facile compounds, easily resolvable into their constituents; for Unsworth, usually $2 + 2 = 5$. In the defiance of gravity (river stones hovering just above the ground yet so heavy they almost pull out the ceiling joists), there is a sense of heart-grabbing wonder at the levitation and suspension that justifies the well-worn phrase: 'the unbearable lightness of being'.

Propped stone piece 1976

19 river stones, wood and mirrors; dimensions variable

Gift of the artist 2000 203.2000.a-nn

Villa des Vergessens II

from the portfolio *Aus Australien* 1987

lithograph on stone; 99.5 x 70.3 cm sheet

Purchased 1989 81.1989.32

Rapture 1994

piano, straw, burnt music sheets, plastic mice; 310 x 149 x 310 cm

Winifred Vere Hole Bequest Fund 1994 185.1994.a-j

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ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

An Australian Accent was an unusual Kaldor project. Research the objective of this project and outline the fundamental change of strategy and outcome. Suggest why this was a timely decision in 1984 and a forward-thinking one in the evolution of the Kaldor projects.

An Australian Accent was initially shown in New York. Investigate the history of this city as an important art centre. Propose why John Kaldor chose to present and promote Australian art there rather than in other recognised art centres such as London and Paris. At the time, Australia was not considered a centre of anything. What contributed to this perception of Australia being on the fringe, both literally and conceptually? Discuss the possible advantages for a culture of being outside the mainstream.

Research P.S.1 in New York. Where does its title come from? What is its mission as an exhibition venue? How does it present exhibitions differently to New York's major art museums? Do you consider staging *An Australian Accent* there a savvy strategic move on John Kaldor's part?

John Kaldor took on a greater role for this project as the curator of the exhibition, choosing the three artists he believed produced the best examples of Australian art at the time to be presented internationally. Do you agree with his choice? Investigate the practice of the three artists and propose why they may have been chosen. Does this representation of Australian art ring true today for you?

Consider the roles of the curator and the art patron. For *An Australian Accent*, John Kaldor acted as both. Is there any potential for conflict of interest when both roles are filled by the same person? Like Harald Szeemann, Kaldor was working as an independent curator, outside the museum system, once again on the fringes. What freedoms did this give Kaldor in his agenda to promote contemporary art? How might this have been problematic for the official agencies whose function is to do just that, such as the Australia Council for the Arts?

Investigate Imants Tillers, Mike Parr and Ken Unsworth, and each artist's body of work. What age were they, and at what stage in their careers, when they took part in *An Australian Accent*? Consider their personal backgrounds and the influences on their practice. Assess the work they produced for the exhibition. How would you characterise it in terms of media and themes. Was it considered typically Australian at that time? Is it today? Contrast the vision of Australia presented by Tillers, Parr and Unsworth with the 'traditional' vision of the Heidelberg school.

Research how *An Australian Accent* was received in New York and then at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington DC. Compare this with responses in Australia when the exhibition was presented at the Art Gallery of Western Australian and the Art Gallery of NSW. Artist Mike Parr remembered the show as 'a breakthrough, with a real impact in the United States', and that it 'precipitated a major change in Australian art'. Research the 'breakthrough' and 'major change' that Parr noted. Until this time, what were the major influences in Australian art and how were we perceived as a culture internationally?

Define the terms 'provincialism problem' (Terry Smith) and 'tyranny of distance' (Geoffrey Blainey). How do they relate to the discussion of Australian culture historically? Consider if these terms are relevant today. While often considered negative, is there evidence that the factors behind these terms are increasingly embraced as important points of difference in our culture and contribute to Australians' sense of ourselves and our place in the world? Discuss what Imants Tillers may have meant when he said, as a result of distance, our reliance on photomechanical reproduction has made Australia postmodern by default.

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Cover: Installation view of Imants
Tillers' works in *An Australian Accent*
at P.S.1 in New York in 1984.
Photo: Andrew Moore
Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects

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