

EDUCATION NOTES
INVESTIGATING ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY
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ART
GALLERY
NSW

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

1971
HARALD
SZEEMANN



1971 HARALD SZEEMANN

PROJECT

I want to leave a nice well-done child here

29 April – 13 May 1971
Bonython Gallery, Sydney

4 June – 4 July 1971
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

It is not a theme but rather as a dimension.
We don't wish to illustrate a style, a theme, but
to offer a possible opening: to give connotation,
to sustain freedom against barriers erected by
styles, nationalities and nationalisms, by the
idea of age limits ... as if the age of an artist
was a decisive factor for the youth of his work ...
To be intensities outside ideologies and stock
exchange. *L'imagination au pouvoir* – to quote
a motto from '68. To celebrate fragility again.

Harald Szeemann, 49th Venice Biennale catalogue, 2001, on his choice of
title *Platea dell'umanita* [Plateau of humankind]

HARALD SZEEMANN

Szeemann (second from left)
at a 'meet the artists' function
at John Kaldor's showroom

Photo: Brian Adams



1971 HARALD SZEEMANN

INTRODUCTION

The influential Swiss art critic and curator of the Kunsthalle Bern, director of multiple Venice Biennales and *documenta 5*, Harald Szeemann redefined the boundary between artist and curator, establishing many of the basic premises of contemporary art exhibition today. He created the modern-day *Großausstellung* ('great exhibition'), in which the artworks are tied to a central cross-disciplinary theme and reconfigured into startling, often non-chronological juxtaposition. Szeemann singlehandedly proposed the notion of the independent curator, who restlessly scouted around the world looking for identifiable patterns in the culture. His groundbreaking exhibition of 1969, *Live in your head: when attitudes become form*, was the first major survey of conceptual art to take place in Europe, in which he experimented with non-museum spaces. In 1971, he travelled to Australia at the invitation of John Kaldor to curate an exhibition of the recent work of more than 20 Australian artists: *I want to leave a nice well-done child here*.

ARTIST

Harald Szeemann
born 1933 in Bern, Switzerland
died 2005 in Tegna, Ticino, Switzerland

Harald Szeemann studied art history, archaeology and journalism. He had a short but intense career in theatre during the 1950s, which included a homage to Dadaist Hugo Ball and a one-man production of *Ur faust* where he played all the roles himself. In 1957, he decided to enter the art world and direct exhibitions, and by 1961, at the age of 28, he had been appointed director of the Kunsthalle Bern, which had no permanent collection but a bare-bones venue that encouraged what was to become Szeemann's signature style – a kind of improvisational, laboratory approach where an exhibition of the most challenging vanguard work from America and Europe opened every month. This was where Christo and Jeanne-Claude had their first major project (wrapping the kunsthalle in 1968) and where Andy Warhol had one of his first shows in a European institution.

Live in your head: when attitudes become form was the first major survey of conceptual art to take place in Europe. Subtitled 'Works, concepts, processes, situations, information', this 1969 exhibition marked an important shift as a method and model for exhibition practice, in that artists were more or less free to contribute any work that they felt would be relevant. The 69 artists, in Szeemann's words, 'took over the institution'. They also did their best to redefine the physical conditions for the show: Lawrence Weiner removed three square feet of wall space; Michael Heizer demolished the sidewalk with a metal ball; Richard Serra contributed one of his *Splash pieces*, involving molten lead. Richard Long left the institutional framework behind altogether and went on a three-day hike in the Swiss mountains.

Szeemann travelled to Australia for his Kaldor project in 1971, only the year after he had resigned from the Kunsthalle Bern and officially begun working as world's first 'independent curator', and the year before he would curate his *documenta 5* exhibition in Kassel, where he would transform what was once a diet of one-man shows and national and period surveys of art into his first large-scale thematic exhibition.

In his later career Szeemann continued to forge new perspectives, leading international interest in Chinese contemporary artists and art from the Balkan regions. For decades, he worked out of a studio he called 'The Factory' in the small Swiss village of Tegna, conceiving exhibitions that were international in scope and consistently dodging the categories of traditional museum practice, often daring to place historical and contemporary artworks beside anthropological artefacts, sacred objects, technical devices and occult instruments. Szeemann sought, he said, to create shows that were 'poems in space', with a genuine belief that art exhibitions were spiritual undertakings with the power to conjure alternative ways of organising society. The curator as meta-artist, utopian thinker, even shaman.

PROJECT

Harald Szeemann travelled to Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne during an intense two-week period in April 1971, visiting museums, galleries and 70 artists' studio. His exhibition of 22 young artists in Sydney's Bonython Gallery interior and courtyard and later, with an additional artist, at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria was titled *I want to leave a nice well-done child here*. It was the first major conceptual show in an Australian museum, and critic James Gleeson in his review for the *Sun* explained its importance to Australia: 'it presents the conceptual artist's point of view as decisively and with as much impact as the now famous *Field* exhibition's presentation of abstract minimalism in 1968' (5 May 1971, p 47).

The 22 artists whose works were included in the Sydney exhibition were: John Armstrong, Tony Bishop, Robert Boynes, Gunter Christmann, Tony Coleing, Aleks Danko, Margaret Dodd, Neil Evans, Ross Grounds, Dale Hickey, Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy, Warren Knight, Nigel Lendon, Ian Milliss, Ti Parks, Mike Parr (who also designed the invitation), Guy Stuart and Alec Tzannes, along with a collaborative work from William Pidgeon, Brett Whiteley and Tony Woods. For Melbourne, a work by Mike Brown was added, while some of the artists created new works for that show.

Szeemann was a prophetic activist in search of visionaries. There are people who have an inexplicable ability to detect subterranean currents of water or (especially in the Alpine countries) crystals and veins of precious ore, and Szeemann was like that – a kind of dowser of artistic energy. He knew he had this gift, and although he was not a significant theoretical writer, he often wrote with great energy and detail about his quest – in diaries, preparatory notes, open letters, and beautifully impulsive catalogue essays and articles.

Daniel Birnbaum, 'Passages', *Artforum International*, 22 June 2005

WORLD EVENTS: 1971

- _ The microprocessor – the foundation for today's computers – is introduced
- _ Greenpeace founded
- _ Jerzy Kosinski publishes *Being there*, his satirical novel on TV viewing
- _ Hans Haacke's exhibition about real-estate ownership cancelled by New York's Guggenheim Museum
- _ Artist Chris Burden has himself shot in the arm with a 22-calibre rifle five times for *Shoot piece*
- _ Geoffrey Bardon encourages the Aboriginal people of Papunya to paint a mural and then on canvas, leading to the Papunya Tula art movement
- _ **2nd Kaldor project:** Harald Szeemann curates the exhibition *I want to leave a nice well-done child here* at Sydney's Bonython Gallery and Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria

THEME

The role of the curator

Traditionally, a curator has been defined as the custodian of a museum or other collection – essentially a keeper of things. The Association of Art Museum Curators identifies curators as having a primary responsibility for the acquisition, care, display and interpretation of objects, such as works of art. They work with their institutions to develop programs that maintain the integrity of collections and exhibitions, foster community support, and generate revenue.

A curator of an exhibition is the person who is in charge of organising it. The curator decides on which artists' work will be featured, the title or name of the exhibition and its theme or subject. The curator is traditionally the 'object specialist' who works in tandem with 'audience specialists', like educators and public programs and other staff. Curators may thus reach audiences not only through exhibitions, but publications, websites, forums and other events.

While the traditional curator maintains a collection of art/artefacts by preserving, exhibiting and studying those objects, the contemporary curator need not work with a collection or objects at all, and instead engages with cultural meaning and production, often from a position of development that is shared with the artist. This requires sensitivity to the interests and intentions of the artist.

As art practices expand, the work of the curator expands to accommodate or reflect them. Harald Szeemann's career marked the change from working at some remove from the processes of art production, to becoming actively involved in its development. This shift in the role of the curator can be seen as a response to the changing meaning and relevance of the art object over the last four decades: dematerialisation prompted a redefinition of art to deal with conceptual art, process art and performance art among others.

After Szeemann, the figure of the curator would no longer be seen as a blend of bureaucrat and cultural impresario. Instead, he emerged as a kind of artist himself. The collapsing definitions of curator into artist and vice versa reveal art and curatorial practices to be ever evolving as the territories overlap.

Szeemann's 1969 exhibition *Live in your head: when attitudes become form* at the Kunsthalle Bern irrevocably changed the public role of the curator who was now less a passive facilitator than an active player – a refashioned creative agent responsible for the exhibition's very staging as an event. After resigning from his position at Bern, Szeemann became something that had never previously existed: the independent curator. It was a role that would affect the most fundamental operations of the museum community for decades to come, focusing less on conventional tasks such as collecting, restoring or keeping board members and trustees happy. Instead, Szeemann's shows were a one-person business, run on passion and obsession, with a team of devoted collaborators taking care of exhibition architecture, transportation, insurance problems, bookkeeping and all other practical matters.

Where no obsessions are to be discerned.
I have no reason to linger.

Harald Szeemann

What is a collection? Curators select, assemble and arrange works in the most historically significant or resonant way, thus forming a 'collection'. Although this term conveys the impression of an imaginary totality, a collection is not a canon, with its sense of closure. It is, in fact, really a 'selection', and no single museum has access to everything. A collection is ever expanding and ever accommodating, but also limited by time, space and money. It's closer to an anthology of works, and the activity of curating is a bit like that of an editor preparing an anthology for publication. Over time, major and minor works are teased out – major works are those that seem to reconfigure the cultural geography. Some works become interesting in certain contexts, while many stay shelved in the basement for a long time.

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

- **Jihad Muhammad John Armstrong** (Australia, b1948)

One to twenty 1975

rope, wood, birdcage, clay; 190 x 260 x 100 cm

Purchased 1976 177.1976

- **Gunter Sylvester Christmann** (Germany; Australia, b1936)

Eleven a.m. 1969

synthetic polymer paint on canvas; 132 x 132 cm

Purchased with funds provided by the Sali Herman Gift Fund 1969

OA25.1969

- **Tony Coleing** (Australia, b1942)

Untitled 1970

colour lithograph; 71.1 x 96.5 cm

Purchased 1974 36.1974

- **Aleks Danko** (Australia, b1950)

'just a pile of tricks'

handmade ceramic brick; 8.7 x 21.9 x 7 cm

Gift of Betty and Brian Kelly 2008 379.2008

- **Margaret Dodd** (Australia, b1941)

This woman is not a car 1982

16 mm colour and black-and-white film, optical sound; 23 mins duration

Purchased with assistance from the Visual Arts Board, Australia Council 1986

36.1986

- **Tim Johnson** (Australia, b1947)

Fittings 1971

book of 28 photocopied leaves on paper, edition of 90; 6.1 x 20.7 x 0.5 cm

(closed)

Accessioned 2009 284.2009

- **Peter Kennedy** (Australia, b1945)

Seven people who died the day I was born – April 18, 1945

(part 1) 1997–98

type C photographs, fluorescent tubes with text, metal; 262.5 x 600 cm

Contemporary Collection Benefactors 2003 31.2003

- **Ti Parks** (United Kingdom; Australia; New Zealand, b1939)

One thousand drawings 1973

pen on paper, mixed media; 244.0 x 549 cm

Purchased 1976 150.1976

- **Brett Whiteley** (Australia, b1939, d1992)

Aboriginal drawing c1970

synthetic polymer paint, ink, gouache, collage on paper; 73.5 x 71 cm

Purchased 1970 WA9.1970

SELECTED REFERENCES

- _ Tobia Bezzola, Hal Foster & Jean-Marc Poinot, *Harald Szeemann: individual methodology*, JRPIRingier, Switzerland 2008
- _ Sophie Forbat (ed), *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney 2009
- _ Gerhard Mack & Harald Szeemann, *Art museums: into the 21st century*, Birkhauser Verlag, Basel 1999
- _ Hans-Joachim Muller, *Harald Szeemann: the exhibition maker*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, New York 2006
- _ Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed), *A brief history of curating (documents)*, JRPIRingier, Switzerland 2008. Maps the development of curating, from early independent curators such as Szeemann to the inception of the various biennales and fairs

Websites

- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects
- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects
www.kaldorartprojects.org.au
- _ Association of Art Museum Curators
www.artcurators.org/aboutus_plan.asp
- _ 'Harald Szeemann 1933–2005', *Frieze Magazine*, issue 91, May 2005
www.frieze.com/issue/article/harald_szeemann_1933_2005
- _ 'The role of the curator', Tate Online
www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/nauman/themes_4.htm

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Szeemann was known as the first 'independent curator' in the world. While this was considered an innovation at the time, curatorial practice of this nature is considered standard today. Investigate Szeemann's education, training and work at the Kunsthalle Bern. Suggest how this might have influenced his independent philosophy and spirit as a curator. Consider what the implications would be to operate as a curator independent of a museum, then and now.

One of Szeemann's innovations was to develop thematic exhibitions, moving beyond traditional formats of solo artist or chronological historical hangs. Research biennales, *documenta* and other independently curated exhibitions. Create a list of the curators developing them and the themes they are working with. Identify and discuss if there have been any thematic trends at certain times.

It has been suggested that Szeemann re-invented the role of curator from a passive one to an active one. Identify within his curatorial practice why this distinction has been made and how he aligned his role more closely with the role of the artist and vice versa. Investigate, in particular, his groundbreaking 1969 exhibition *Live in your head: when attitudes become form*.

Szeemann was invited by John Kaldor to Australia for the second Kaldor project, one year after he had officially left the museum system and started working as an independent. Propose why this opportunity might have interested both Szeemann and Kaldor. Outline the Kaldor project Szeemann developed and the elements that were signature to this work. Discuss the artists and works selected for the exhibition and why you think they were included. Szeemann was fond of poetic and enigmatic titles for his projects. List some of them. Suggest how the title for his 1971 Australian exhibition reflects his curatorial strategy.

Research the response in Australia to Szeemann's exhibition *I want to leave a nice well-done child here*. Reviewing the exhibition today, with the distance of time, discuss if you view its format, content and presentation in the same way it was perceived in 1971.

In 'The role of the curator' (see Theme on page 5), it is suggested that as the practices of artists expand so do the practices of curators, to accommodate or reflect them. Select an art museum in your local area and examine its exhibitions. Compare collection exhibitions with temporary exhibitions and analyse them in terms of curatorial practice. Identify traditional and more contemporary curatorial practices such as those developed by Szeemann. Examine, as a comparison, the exhibition *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects* at the Art Gallery of NSW.

Propose an exhibition based around a key theme that is relevant to you and your audience. Research and nominate a group of artists, Australian and international, from any time or culture, to represent this theme. Present a brief justifying these choices and pitch it to your peers. Propose a non-museum venue and title that would amplify this theme and your rationale for the audience. Discuss the idea that installation of artworks is a form of interpreting them. Debate the curator's responsibilities to the artist and the viewer in presenting works of art for public display.

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