Chapter Six

Conclusion

As stated in the Introduction, this thesis attempts to reinscribe the Mildura Sculpture Triennial events from 1961 to 1978 into recent Australian art history. The purpose of this re-inscription is to support the claim that these triennial events were important contributors to the institutional development of Australian contemporary art practice and that they specifically brought together the disparate components that would connect into a web and eventually create an autonomous field of artistic production, the visual arts profession.

The cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s model of the genesis of an autonomous field of cultural production offered a non-teleological framework within which to rehabilitate these events as sites through which to map the rapid changes in government policies, and other external social, economic and political events, that would provide the necessary preconditions for the evolution of an autonomous field of professional activity, within the visual arts.

It is my argument that the Mildura Triennials, between 1961 and 1978, provide a valuable case study through which to investigate the development of a radically new context for art making in Australia. Because there had been only a limited tradition and hence a very small market for sculpture in Australia and, given that the Mildura events of the 1960s were an attempt to establish a basis for both, the impact of the emergence and development of an autonomous field of artistic practice was particularly evident within sculpture. The sculpture triennials were important nodal points in an emerging visual arts
network, thus they provide a window through which the rapid institutional changes in the Australian art scene at the time, can be observed and their impact assessed.

The autonomy that many sculptors, lecturers, academics and administrators had argued for as a necessity for a new type of professional training for artists was imported within the new tertiary education system, which drew upon the autonomous university model with its established concept of value determined by expert peer-review. This logic of educational autonomy and of the autonomous professional dispositions this nurtured, the emphasis on status and credentials (accorded by expert peers), cohered in and underpinned the development of an autonomous field of artistic production. The evolution of each of the components, particularly the expanded tertiary education system and the sculptors’ drive for professional recognition and accreditation, was driven by their own needs and necessities and not by the needs of the larger field of which they would eventually become a part.

There is a key misrecognition in the claim that the emergence of a fully funded and functioning Australian Council for the Arts in 1973 was responsible for creating a demand for the arts, evident in the council general manager Jean Battersby’s claim that: ‘since the grants system was introduced, there has been an enormous increase in creative activity’. What this statement does not acknowledge is that the Australian Council for the Arts (and its later statutory entity, the Australia Council) itself emerged in response to demand; it did not create demand. One of the key pressures it was responding to was this rapidly expanding, new generation of emerging artists being pumped out of the new tertiary art training system, in need of validation and consecration; something that could not be provided by the existing market. The council under the previous Liberal-Country Party government recognised this fact as early as 1970 when it noted that it might be appropriate to consider ‘introducing other forms of assistance for artists,’ as ‘[the market] may not have the same validity when applied to certain other branches of the visual arts

such as sculpture and possibly to the truly “avant garde” artists … whose work rarely has much initial appeal except perhaps to a very limited public.  

However, this rapid expansion in the numbers participating in the new tertiary art education system, threatened the raised status and credibility of the credentials offered (status accrues to rarity), particularly in sculpture, which had little external market in which to validate its producers and their graduates. This was particularly evident in Melbourne, which had the largest concentration of art schools which taught sculpture, that were transferring from technical colleges to the new tertiary institutes and, because of Victoria’s readiness to adapt to the new Commonwealth regulations, was one of the first states to adapt to this new regime. The competitive pressures and the level of participation by recent graduates, young sculptor-educators and their students at the 1970 Mildura Sculpture Triennials is evidence of this change and further evidence of the very necessity of the Mildura Sculpture Triennials as the only serious opportunity for national exhibition and validation, particularly with the concurrent demise of art prizes.

The autonomous field of tertiary art education was the economic basis for this new generation of sculptor-educators. There was already evident by 1970 – and certainly evident in the invitational (peer-selected) 1970 Mildura Sculpture Triennial – a pre-existing demand to support emerging artists and experimental art not suited to the market place. As their selection was largely not determined by external legitimation in the market, the necessary corollary for the selection of emerging artists was by professional peer-review, which in the instance of the Mildura Triennials, was often their own lecturers.

New ideas about art forms, new curricula for the teaching of art within a tertiary rather than technical sector, new professional identities and new selection criteria to validate this new professionalism, new critical theories, within rapidly expanding and evolving institutional structures, backed by significant government patronage, came into effect in

Australia within a decade. These were rapid and interconnected changes that created a kind of positive feedback loop where change is cumulative and exponential. However, positive feedback it is an inherently unstable state for any evolving system, leading to unpredictable chain reactions. The fiscal cutbacks ordered by Fraser’s Razor Gang across all federal government departments introduced some controls on the exponential growth and paradoxically, some stability. By 1978, Mildura effectively fell victim to a re-ordered hierarchy within the increasingly complex field of positions, competing for scarcer resources, which now favoured a concentration of status and institutions within the metropolitan centres.

The gatherings at Mildura Sculpture Triennials encouraged the development of a concept of being a member of a professional group and these events became part of a complex feedback loop of shared professional identity that developed a momentum all of its own. The Mildura Sculpture Triennials and McCullough’s vision literally provide a ‘field’ on which various entities – professional associations, organisations and individuals – could compete for increasingly differentiated positions within this emergent and rapidly institutionalising field of professional practice.

The Mildura Triennials of the 1960s and 1970s represent a transitional phase in the process of moving from relative neglect of the visual arts by government in Australia to a highly differentiated and complex field of institutions and individuals, funded by and relatively autonomous of, government. It was a major paradigm shift, resulting in a new parallel economy made possible by government patronage.

Both McCullough’s and Davis’s career trajectories could be said to have been ‘made in Mildura.’ The state of Victoria also offered a particularly articulate view of the unfolding processes; it had a state government that was actively committed to funding cultural infrastructure and was also committed to taking advantage of the Commonwealth Government’s new tertiary educational proposals – setting up a parallel system of Colleges of Advanced Education – that was announced in the Martin Report of 1965. By 1967, the Victorian Institute of Colleges was established, and it was through this body that sculptors such as the Centre 5 group and various arts groups and individuals working
with the funding assistance of UNESCO who had been lobbying for the improved status for artists through improving their professional education and training, realised that their advocacy would be realised in these new accredited institutes and colleges.

Davis is emblematic of the new professional sculptor. Like many of the core advisors to McCullough in the 1970s, he is also a member of a self-aware group of young sculptors who are the beneficiaries of the expansion of the new tertiary system of education. The expansion of the education system, and the consequent expanded employment opportunities this offered, posited the first real challenge and alternative economy to the existing heterogeneous market economy for artistic works.

Davis, like many of his Mildura colleagues, came to sculpture at a time of transition. His first real encounter was at the 1st Mildura Sculpture prize exhibition (which he helped install and also participated in) and it was this experience, and those he met there, that inspired him to move back to Melbourne and undertake the associate diploma in sculpture at RMIT, the premier sculptural training institute in Victoria under the direction of leading Centre 5 members. Like a number of his colleagues, he was one of the last of the trained sculptors for whom autonomy was not an assumed given. For his students, particularly from 1972 onwards when the full status of the Colleges of Advanced Education was in place, the reality that generated the Centre 5’s professional mandate, its emphasis on education to develop an external market because it was the only market, was no longer a necessity. The professional dispositions Davis’s students acquired during the 1970s were fundamentally the product of an expanding educational and institutional system, where the audience for their works was the ‘educated and informed’ of which they were a part. An under-recognised legacy of the Whitlam Labor Government was its policy linking of education to the arts in order to nurture a receptive audience for the art: ‘the objectives of a Labor government [are that]… educational opportunities have as their goal the creation of a society in which the arts… can flourish. Our other objectives are all a means to an end, the enjoyment of the arts is an end in itself.’\textsuperscript{688} It is this generation and

later generations of students trained as artists, administrators and art academics who, because of the professional dispositions learned within the autonomous education and arts environments, underwritten by government funding and policy support, misrecognise the significance of what comes into being and is made visible at each Mildura Sculpture Triennial event.

Tom McCullough, like Davis, began his life in Mildura as a secondary school art teacher. His acceptance of the offer to become director of the Mildura Art Gallery, and later Arts Centre, in 1965 was not unusual. There were no formal qualifications for regional gallery directors; most appointees were part-time seconded art teachers in the role of education officers. He had the backing of powerful political and cultural links between Mildura and Melbourne.

However, by the late 1960s, the issue of professional development as a way of providing a career path for directors of the regional galleries arose, partly driven by the need to counteract the strong competition for art teachers in the new, and better paid art schools. Professional autonomy would increasingly become a feature of the changes within the regional gallery network throughout the 1970s. By the 1970 Mildura Sculpture Triennial, McCullough was an exemplar of the new role of curators as commissioners rather than keepers. In Charles Green’s own admission, ‘the Mildura Triennials marked a phase in the increasing public role of curators as mediators between artist and audience. This transition encouraged actively entrepreneurial taste-making.’

The change in the event format from prize to a highly selective, invitational exhibition, profiling in many cases unknown, young and emerging artists which gave the triennial events a fresh, festival edge, was premised upon his network of talent spotters. From 1970 onwards, these talent spotters were increasingly drawn from the sculptor-lecturers in the emerging tertiary art education sector. By 1973, McCullough’s dependence on this group of peer selectors, exposed his vulnerability to their bid for control of the selection

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and exhibition process. Although the response to the proposed French exhibition was genuinely a political protest, the threat to boycott the triennials tested the power of this group to challenge McCullough’s and the MACAC’s control of selection and exhibition. It was not just those sculptors who signed the petition who would boycott the event, it was their control of the access to the emerging artists that was also at stake. However, it is the collusion of McCullough and the Mildura Sculpture Triennials’ need for the ‘new’ to refresh the events and provide a festival atmosphere with his core advisors’ need to promote and validate themselves and their products (graduates, students, other young sculptor-lecturers) as the ‘emerging’ and ‘advanced art’ new talent, brought together so successfully at Sculpturscape ’73, that sustains the claim that the Australian Council for the Arts, reinvigorated under Whitlam’s aegis, was a response to existing demand, not the creator of it.

For McCullough the success of the Mildura Sculpture Triennial of 1975 was not only the funding response of both federal and state arts agencies, more significantly it was the recognition by the visiting members and staff of the VAB of the possible transfer of the Mildura model (a festival-type event, McCullough’s logistical and negotiation skills, a peer selection process and network) as the structure for the Biennale of Sydney, and his appointment as the director of this internationally focused event in 1976. However, contained within the triumph of the transfer of the model to Sydney and the Australia Council, the biennale’s acceptance by the AGNSW trustees and staff into the hallowed halls of the premier state gallery and the event’s successful outcome, were the seeds of both McCullough’s demise in Mildura and the demise of the Mildura Sculpture Triennial model that he had established.

Although both Mildura and McCullough have largely been forgotten, the conceptual framework of emerging artists and new definitions of art, as well as selection based upon peer review and a definition of audience as both participants and practitioners, has remained as the differentiating marker of an autonomous field of the visual arts practice.
Bourdieu’s treatises on the genesis and development of the autonomous field of cultural production, and the significance of the autonomy of the field of education in relation to the development of an autonomous cultural field, underpins the reappraisal, in this thesis, of the value of the Mildura Sculpture Triennials as sites for mapping this development.

This thesis provides the first critical examination of the Mildura Sculpture Triennials between 1961 and 1978. By examining the broader cultural context of the period, combined with a close reading of primary sources and archival material, this thesis investigates what actually occurred and speculates on the possible causes of these developments. What emerges is evidence that these triennial Mildura sculpture events were more than just a microcosm of developments in contemporary Australian sculptural practice or sites for reading the seismic shifts unfolding in the Australian art world. They were, in fact, catalysts that contributed to the evolution of a new phenomenon, the autonomous field of the visual arts profession.

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\[690\] Returning to a quote from Bourdieu’s *Rules of Art*, op. cit., p. 170, used in the Introduction to the thesis: ‘The appearance of this new definition of art and the role of the artist cannot be understood independently of the transformations in the field of artistic production. The constitution of an unprecedented ensemble of institutions … the growth in personnel … dedicated to the celebration of the work of art, the intensification of the circulation of works and of artists … and the multiplication of galleries … everything combines to favour the establishment of an unprecedented relationship between the interpreters and the work of art.’