**Introduction**

**Thesis rationale**

The history and significance of the Mildura Sculpture Triennials is a neglected area of recent Australian art history and has not been the subject of a detailed scholarly investigation. It is almost fifty years since the Mildara Sculpture Prize (as it was first known) was inaugurated in 1961 and thirty years since the departure of the event’s second and key director Thomas McCullough in 1978. Sufficient time has elapsed to allow for a critical reappraisal.

There were ten Mildura triennial sculpture events between 1961 and 1988. However, this thesis focuses only on those seven events from 1961 to 1978, which encompass the directorships of Eric van Hattum who established this first national sculpture survey in 1961 and managed the second event in 1964, followed by Thomas (Tom) McCullough, who directed the triennials until his forced resignation in 1978.¹ These were nationally significant events and they provide a valuable case study of the developments in sculptural practice in Australia. The sculpture triennials were important nodal points, providing a window through which the rapid institutional changes in the Australian art scene at the time, can be observed and their impact assessed. Given that there was virtually no market for contemporary sculpture in Australia at the inauguration of the

¹ Following McCullough’s resignation, the Mildura Arts Centre and the Mildura City Council reinstated the sculpture triennials in 1982. However, they were a much-diminished version of the original, competing as they were with national, metropolitan events such as the Australian Sculpture Triennial established by McCullough in Melbourne (1981–1993), ANZART (1981–1985), Australian Perspecta (1981–1999) and the Biennale of Sydney (1973 onwards). The changes in the cultural landscape in Australia between 1978 and 1982 were significant. Sculpture was no longer regarded as the radical form under which new types of art practice made their appearance and, by 1981, any event of national significance was based in the metropolitan centres.
Mildura events in the 1960s, the extent of the impact of the pressures and expectations of a burgeoning young population upon tertiary education, specifically the art schools, art history departments and teacher training, and the expanding desire for cultural fulfilment and rapid developments in the cultural institution sector, is clearly delineated at these triennial events.

In order to reinscribe the Mildura Sculpture Triennials into recent Australian art history as an important contributor to the institutional development of Australian sculptural and contemporary art practice, I have drawn upon the reflexive methodological framework of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, and his concept of the development of an autonomous field of artistic production. Bourdieu’s method provides an interpretative framework with which to identify the components necessary to the development of an institutional identity; an ‘ecological’ view of art as a system of interlocking, recursive elements that become the dynamically evolving system that is an autonomous field of artistic production.

Mildura’s significance lies in the way in which it brought together the disparate components that would connect to and eventually create an autonomous field of artistic production – the visual arts profession. However, the evolution of each of the components, which were the bedrock of Mildura, was driven by its own needs and necessities and not by the needs of the larger field of which they would eventually become a part. Bourdieu’s understanding of the ontological complicity between dispositions (habitus) and the development of an autonomous field offers a non-teleological approach to the significance of Mildura as a site to map these rapid changes and also Mildura’s subsequent virtual erasure from the historical record.

**Thesis topic and its significance**

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. During this period, new ideas about art forms, new curricula for the teaching of art within a tertiary rather than technical sector, new ways of viewing and
exhibiting contemporary experimental art, new critical theories and political awareness, within expanded institutional structures, backed by significant government patronage, came into effect throughout Australia. This change was rapid and interconnected. Mildura Arts Centre and its triennials, under the direction of Tom McCullough, became a unique site for the convergence of many significant players within these rapidly expanding institutions to exchange, discuss, argue, lobby, teach and make art in one place, at the same time.

I am arguing that Mildura, far from being just a provincial centre that offered the Australian art world a sculptural jamboree every three years, was actually an integral part of these new institutional processes. It is significant that at the beginning of the 1970s, a public art gallery with sufficient government funding was able to present and commission non-commercial, experimental art works by an increasing number of emerging artists, who could interact with some of Australia’s leading contemporary sculptors at a gathering of major critics, art lecturers and academics, curators, state and regional gallery directors, art bureaucrats, dealers and frequently, board members of various art organisations and institutions. The gatherings at the Mildura Sculpture Triennials encouraged the development of a concept of being a member of a professional group. The logic of the institution, of a visual arts profession, has its beginnings in these gatherings at the Mildura Sculpture Triennials during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.

The Mildura Sculpture Triennials and McCullough were part of a complex feedback loop of shared professional identity that developed a momentum of its own. The move from a series of separate entities with localised contact in the 1960s to a nationally recognised field of professional practice, sculpture, in the visual arts by the mid to late 1970s was very rapid and largely happened within one decade. The triennials and McCullough’s vision are pivotal to this process; they provide, literally, a ‘field’ on which the various entities – professional associations, organisations and individuals – could gather, interact, jostle for position within this emergent, increasingly institutionalised field of professional practice.

The triennials of the 1970s represent a transitional phase. McCullough’s insistence on non-hierarchical, encyclopaedic survey shows, inclusive of object to post-object to
spontaneous collaborative and performative works, where students’ works (although in a separate section), were exhibited with major artists, was his trademark. They were mostly characterised by a sincere desire to change the world and, in spirit and intention, they were radical. His collaborative selection process was based around a core group of artist-teachers (lecturers at art schools, art history and theory departments, lecturers in related university disciples such as architecture and teacher training colleges) as advisors, and drew on their recommendations of students and emerging artists for invitation. The rapid expansion in the number of participants, both as exhibitors and students, of each subsequent triennial from 1970 onwards was indicative of the expansion in the number of art schools required to cope with the enrolment demands of a new generation. What was perhaps masked by the increase in the numbers at Mildura, was that an active peer selection process was in place.

The core artists were based in institutions in the cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Auckland, with participation from Launceston from 1975. These tastemakers, who competed for control of the definition of art and how it was taught and were responsible for the production and certification of a new professional class of artists, were a critical part of the coming into being of a ‘field of competition for the monopoly of artistic legitimation’ or consecration that developed in the late 1960s and gathered momentum in the 1970s in Australia.²

The increasing professionalism of many of the core triennial artists was not based on involvement in or consecration by the commercial market, but through a new economy made possible via government patronage. This is evident in their employment within the new tertiary art training systems, their status as lecturers, their recognition through Australia Council grants and residencies, inclusion in international biennales, their inclusion in the survey exhibitions of contemporary art at state galleries as well as their participation in various new art organisation boards and committees. The rapidity of the development in Australia of a parallel economic structure for artists, and most

specifically for sculptors and related professionals, is remarkable. In less than a decade a new economic system for art and artists had come into being. As Bourdieu observed:

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.³

Underpinning Bourdieu’s observation of the development of an autonomous field of artistic production is his recognition of the system’s ‘profound dependence on the educational system, the indispensable means of its reproduction and growth’.⁴

The Mildura Sculpture Triennials offer a unique perspective on this development. The difference between the events of the 1960s and 1970s is marked by major changes from prize format to invitational exhibition, from selections made by the directors of the state galleries to recommendations provided by the core group of artists in consultation with the triennial director, from a locally sponsored event to one supported principally through state and federal arts funding, from established sculptors and sculpture to experimental works by emerging artists that are the precursors to the new media in contemporary art practice. By definition, emerging artists are unknown outside the autonomous field, hence their dependence on their selection by recognised participants within the field, in many cases, their lecturers.

Because sculpture had little profile and virtually no market in Australia, the impact of expansionary factors between 1961 and 1978 and their convergence, is particularly marked and identifiable. The expansion of the education system, and the consequent expanded employment opportunities this offered to many young sculptors in the late 1960s and 1970s, posited the first real challenge and alternative economy to the existing heterogeneous market economy for artistic commodities. It was through the expanded educational institutions, with their emphasis on status and professionalism, their

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legitimating credentials, that a ‘field of competition for the monopoly of artistic legitimation’ was made possible.\(^5\)

This thesis claims neither that Mildura was the genesis of the development of new areas of art practice, nor that it was the cause of the development of an autonomous visual art field. What is claimed is that Mildura’s significance lies in its role as a critical nodal point in an expanding and increasingly complex network of systems of institutions and agents and that it provides a close reading of the genesis and development of an autonomous field of visual art practice in Australia.

**Chapter structure**

This thesis is chronologically arranged in six chapters. Each chapter is structured around three primary case studies: the Mildura Arts Centre and its triennial events, director Tom McCullough, and sculptor-teacher John Davis. This polyphonic approach allows the emblematic voices to remain distinct, yet it is through the interweaving of the stories of each case study that the cumulative significance of these events – and what they reveal about developments and changes within the Australian art world – become manifest.

Davis and McCullough are emblematic of emerging professional positions of sculptor-teachers and art administrators and their individual trajectories point to the development of habituses displaying dispositional preferences for autonomy suited to the emerging field of artistic practice that evolved, independent of the existing market. Given the virtual lack of a significant market for sculpture in Australia, even with the best efforts of the early sculpture triennials, the emergence of an autonomous field of behaviour in sculpture was particularly and clearly marked. Davis and McCullough were both born in 1936, both undertook the Victorian Tertiary Secondary Teachers Certificate (TSTC) in order to be secondary school art teachers and both taught in Mildura in the early 1960s. In fact, they met in Mildura through the auspices of the Mildura Art Gallery and, for the purposes of this thesis, their early careers were, it could be said, ‘made in Mildura’.

\(^5\) ibid., p. 252.