

NAMELESSNESS



Peter Cripps

I. NAMELESSNESS

"And when you asked, as all history classes ask, as all history classes should ask, What is the point of history? Why history? Why the past? I used to say. . . But your 'Why?' gives the answer. Your demand for explanation provides an explanation. Isn't this seeking of reasons itself inevitably an historical process, since it must always work backwards from what came after to what came before? And so long as we have this itch for explanations, must we not always carry round with us this cumbersome but precious bag of clues called History?"

The play NAMELESSNESS and its accompanying theatre installation represent one of a number of large, long term projects that Peter Cripps has worked on since the mid seventies. A number of these projects are now drawing close to completion and will be 'published' over the next few years. Cripps has exhibited in group shows and one person exhibitions across this period but the work shown has been drawn mainly from the larger projects. In this way, to date only fragments of the whole have been made public, as it were. Understanding of the fragments requires their intellectual location within the structure and scope of the broader projects.

Cripps is constructing a personal archival documentation of his work.² It is this practice which attracts him to the work of Percy Grainger, the composer, who constructed an actual museum of his own work in Melbourne. Cripps' project can be compared with that of the researcher, releasing from time to time, scientific papers of work-in-progress. It is almost as if the art studio has become a laboratory. Cripps' Blunt Report, a series of published artist papers, the first of which appeared in 1975, can be regarded in this way. One Blunt Report – No. 6 – carried photographs of scenes from an earlier Cripps' play, 'City Life'. NAMELESSNESS with all of its component parts is a larger slice of the overall structure. In one sense then, Cripps' work is hermetically self-referential. The 'Caravan' which Cripps will complete in the not too distant future works as a personal museum. Documentation and artefacts from this theatre will appear within the 'Caravan'.

Cripps' method of working is uncommon within Australian contemporary art, given market and other pressures for yearly one person shows, not to mention the pecuniary needs of the artist. This is not to suggest that he has hidden behind or outside the market, but rather he has chosen his stance knowingly and stuck to it in a most single-minded fashion. In a sense, just as NAMELESSNESS is about the 'other museum', Cripps has constructed himself as the 'other artist'. This situation has meant that he has participated in a wide range of roles within the art system, as an 'exhibitions officer', a curator, director of the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, and art writer, amongst others; all in addition to his role as a working artist. Thus Cripps sees art as his profession and himself as an art worker, eschewing (in an unpretentious way) the art/life distinction. The notion of art as work comes across in various aspects of NAMELESSNESS.

The art market almost demands stylistic continuity from an artist, or a 'signature style'. Cripps grew up in postwar Australia and developed as an artist during the late sixties and seventies. Like many of his generation he was attracted to and influenced by conceptual art. As such, his work coheres through the ideas and concepts which underpin it, rather than through style. On the contrary, style is something Cripps plays with. Indeed, each of the major large scale projects has a different aesthetic; components of each project may even have a different aesthetic or style. This is obviously the case with NAMELESSNESS. For instance, compare the minimalist wooden museum models with

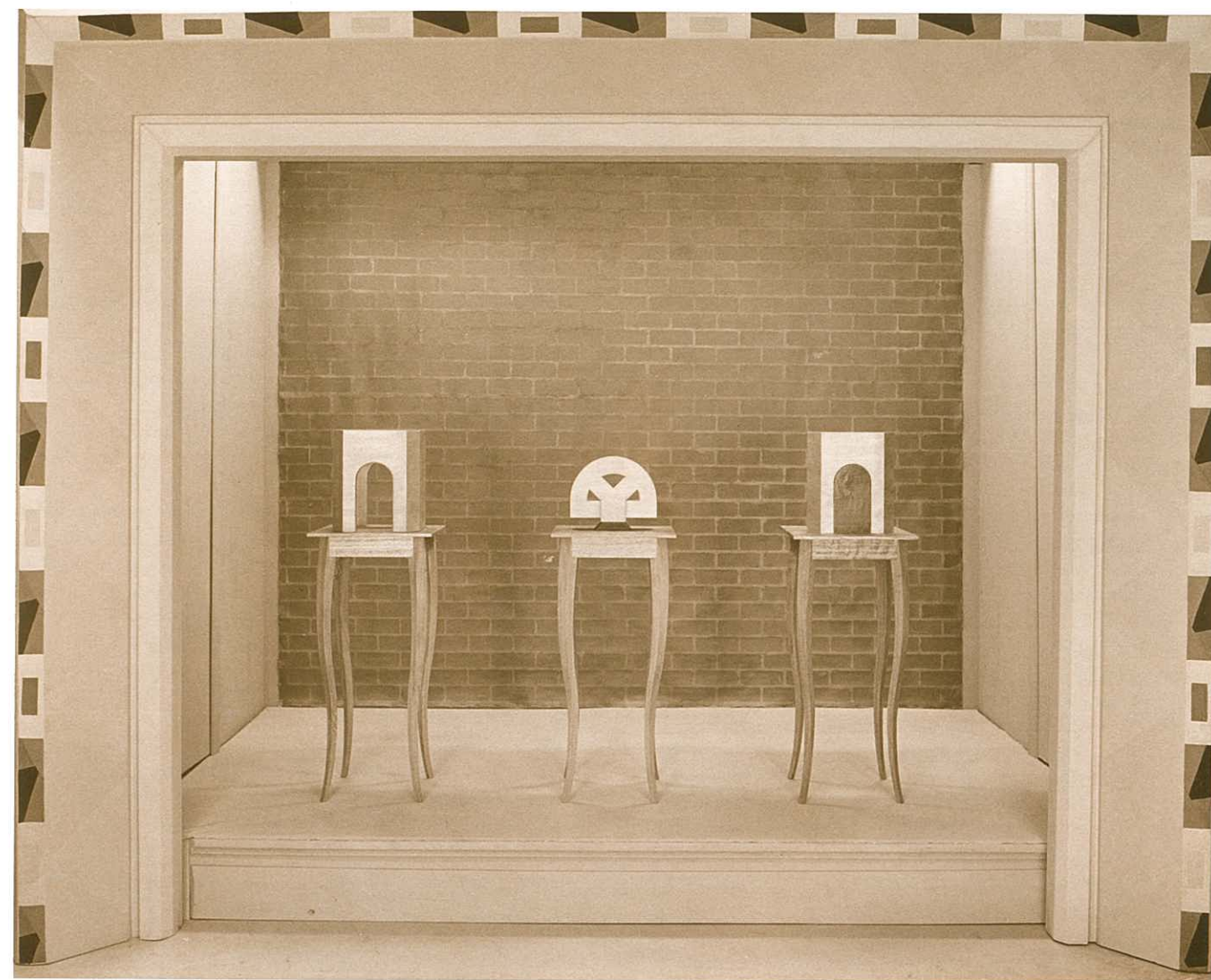
the socialist realism of the Chinese worker backdrop. For Cripps, the style and the aesthetic are malleable parts of the idea structure and it is this idea structure which unifies the projects. Hence, Cripps' approach is syncretic, coalescing the artistically disparate through conceptual unity. In one sense, there almost seems to be a unifying 'conceptual aesthetic'. Cripps' working method and artistic production can be seen as a distillation of the critical seventies project to find or develop a conceptually-based practice, that is a practice which is more idea, than medium-based. Cripps uses objects/props as they relate to ideas rather than vice versa.

Thus Cripps' work, including NAMELESSNESS, most certainly is conceptual in both nature and lineage. "For conceptual art implied the experience of time, space and material rather than their representation in the form of objects, and the body became the most direct medium of expression".³ The variable dependent/independent relationship between space and matter and its manifestation in time has been an ongoing concern in much of Cripps' work. NAMELESSNESS is produced in a model theatre of human proportions, sometimes containing a model museum, while the theatre itself is contained within an operating museum. The model theatre changes its identity in the play between its past and present uses. Questions concerning the relationship between memory, time and the construction of history are also raised when considering the function of and 'proposals for' a museum. Bourdieu has suggested that modernism emphasised the mode of representation as opposed to the object.⁴ Cripps emphasises the mode of representation of ideas.

It is this 'experimental' aspect and complexity of production which probably has limited the audience and potential market for the work. Art fashion its relationship to exposure and exclusion is a factor here as well. Additionally, overseas fashion often impinges upon Australian art developments in a fairly deterministic and constraining way. Cripps' stance on the edge of the art market, along with these other factors, has meant that his work is much better known amongst the art cognoscenti and other artists (particularly his contemporaries whose work has gone in the direction of postconceptual painting) rather than amongst a broader art public. Cripps himself has noted how during the seventies he stood outside the parameters of the commercial gallery structure so as to be able to parody mainstream practice.⁵

As a teenager Peter Cripps created architectural machines. This was the beginning of his hermeticism. While these small, hand-made 'steam engines' were not art in the way sketching might have been, they were however the seeds of his first productions as an artist. Sol Le Witt has said in respect of conceptual art, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art"⁶, a statement which seems particularly apt in considering both Cripps' method of working and the final product. The installations 'Entering Du Prel's Projection' exhibited at Ewing and George Paton Galleries, Melbourne (1976) and its development 'Shells of Past Activities' exhibited at Watters' Gallery, Sydney (1977) included photographs of these machines Cripps had made as a teenager. As well, the work included library cards of books Cripps had read and newspaper photos and headlines from across the period from 1962, including the first moon shots and the assassination of Kennedy. The Watters' version was, unlike the earlier one, covered in veils indicating that the object/idea was no longer developing. Duchamp has written about the impact of life in a museum on the meaning of the object. In a way then, these works attempted to understand the relationship between Cripps' biography, the social structure and history.⁸

While an 'exhibitions officer' at the National Gallery of Victoria Cripps worked on the important (in historical terms) 1973 conceptual exhibition 'Object and Idea'. This exhibition traced its lineage to Duchamp, emphasised artistic production rather than so much the one-off art object, and also stressed the ongoing seriality of conceptually based art work. As Lucy Lippard has put it: "A series is an appropriate vehicle for an ultra-conceptual art, since thinking is ratioci-



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the authority of the museum.¹²⁸ Market success and critical legitimacy are factors in some paintings (most often) and some nonpainting (less often) gaining the imprimatur of the museum, the monograph and the consequent inclusion in the received histories. These factors inter alia contribute to a selectivity and flattening of Australian art history. Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* has argued that this desire for sweeping, stable, singular histories reflects the desire of the conscious subject as much as anything else. In Foucault's words, "Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject – in the form of historical consciousness – will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode."¹²⁹

Australia's economic, cultural as well as geographical location at the peripheral end of international developments has seen 'core' fashion play a determining role in relation to much art practice here (production, curatorial, critical). Painting (and theory) has probably been more overdetermined in this way than nonpainting of the likes of Cripps' work NAMELESSNESS.

The museum like all large scale institutions in societies like ours is a bureaucracy. Acquisition policy occurs via the internal organisational arrangements of the museum. Categorisation of art products dovetails with these acquisition policies, perhaps even as far as a category for the noncategory.

Bureaucracy, as Weber, its original sociological surveyor pointed out, is a contradictory development within modernity. On the one hand, bureaucracy in its technical rational way treats all within mass society, irrespective of station and other ascriptive characteristics, as nominal equals. In this way bureaucratisation is part of the pursuit of formal equality and citizen rights within modernity. On the other hand, bureaucracy can become the 'iron cage' of surveillance, individuation, goal displacement and procedural fetish.¹³⁰ Indeed, the process can go even further, as suggested by Jürgen Habermas¹³¹ (a contemporary descendant of Weber's), with the seeping of technical rationality in an imperialistic and scientific way into spheres beyond its appropriate epistemological location. The 'constitutive interest' of (misplaced) technical rationality is control. Thus, bureaucratisation is a process embedded with contradictory impulses for both equity and control.

A particular version of individualism accompanied the emergence of modernity in the eighteenth century, while individuation accompanied the emergence of bureaucratic mass societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Individuation (including the naming and classifying of individuals) was the dark side of individualism. Individuation lays open the individual to bureaucratic surveillance and control. The power to name is a powerful capacity indeed. Turner (1988)¹³² and Abercrombie and his colleagues (1986)¹³³ refer to these dual and contradictory developments as the 'Foucault paradox'.

In the postwar period these processes have seen the development of mass consumption patterns within our mass society as one link in international consumer capitalism. Individuality and individuation are also manifest here as in Baudrillard's distinction between the unique 'model' and the mass produced 'series'.¹³⁴ As Turner puts it, "While consumerism is typically criticised because it trivialises standards, it is also the case that the spread of mass culture has had an important egalitarian consequence by attacking traditional forms of status inequality and cultural elitism."¹³⁵

The German conceptualist Fritz Rahmann has written about some of these bureaucratic factors in relation to both art production and display in his essay 'Difference to Realspace'.¹³⁶ In that place he develops the concept of 'namelessness' pointing out that the name and the thing it names have separate lives, as it were. In his words, "The value that nameless things possess is fictive. At the moment of

publication fiction appears."¹³⁷ Commenting on the same phenomenon, John Berger states succinctly, "Reality always lies beyond." He adds further, "Reality, however one interprets it, lies beyond a screen of clichés. Every culture produces such a screen, partly to facilitate its own practices (to establish habits) and partly to consolidate its own power. Reality is inimical to those with power."¹³⁸ 'Namelessness' is in one sense then a condition of freedom for, as Rahmann suggests, "Namelessness rests upon the condition that an object is not a part of a system, and it is exactly this autonomy which makes the nameless object a vessel in which various meanings can be collected."¹³⁹ The art system (both mainstream and alternative varieties) abhors namelessness in an administrative sense. Namelessness however is part of a real creative process, an attempt to stand outside of the powerful naming process itself. Once the artist's name is attached or inscribed, the "unmediated quality of the work" is lost and "transforms it into the mythos of the artist's name."¹⁴⁰ Bureaucratisation requires naming of both the object and the producer. Then, as Rahmann points out, "Out of the bureaucratisation of artworks arises the name, and generally speaking the myth of art becomes an object of administration."¹⁴¹ Thus, 'namelessness' is both a source of freedom but also a source of exclusion, internally contradictory in a way similar to the processes of bureaucratisation and individuation. Even with the named art object we need to probe beyond, "To look: at everything which overflows the outline, the contour, the category, the name of what it is."¹⁴²

As mentioned earlier, Baudrillard has written of the distinction between the model (unique) and the series (mass produced) within industrial production.¹⁴³ Today, mass produced objects (the series) refer to the models possessed by an elite minority. The model becomes available for mass consumption via the series. Distinctions within the series deal with the inessential rather than with the primary function of the object (model) and choice at this level of purchase is framed by the cultural system. Individuality within consumer capitalism is constructed as the right to choose between marginally different products. The paradox here of course, as Baudrillard points out, is that the very individual act of choosing the 'individualized' objects incorporates us more tightly within the entire economic structure. Baudrillard also argues that while today no object (series) presents itself as mass produced, difference or personalization is a 'parasitic value'. In his words, "In fact where the industrial object and its technological coherence are concerned, the need for personalization can only be satisfied by inessential details."¹⁴⁴

The model and the series are also distinguished in relation to time; ephemerality and imminent death are built into the fashion based series. Further, "Models move faster than series, they are of the moment, whereas series float somewhere between the past and the present, trying hard to catch up."¹⁴⁵ Yesterday's Parisian haute couture becomes today's mass produced Target consumer good. The model/series distinction also relates to the past or what Baudrillard calls 'cultural nostalgia'. Thus "...the pure series is not found exactly in the present, which is, with the future, the time of the avant garde and of the model, nor in a transcendent past, which is the privilege of leisure and of acquired culture, but in an 'immediate past, an undefined past which is just behind the present, an intermediate temporality into which yesterday's models have fallen."¹⁴⁶

The democratic aspiration is that everyone will gain access to the model (consumer equality) but, for Baudrillard, such a desire is an unattainable Sisyphean one for the present. The model remains forever elusive and closer to the idea.

John Berger¹⁴⁷ in his essay 'Painting and Time' has written how, prior to the revolution wrought by Darwin on our perception of time, the stillness of painting related to timelessness. New cosmologies accompanying the Darwinian revolution rejected this emphasis on the coexistence of ephemerality and the timeless. Prior to this revolution, time was conceived as being "surrounded or infiltrated by



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