

500 Frog Poems

Robert MacPherson

Ben Curnow

Looking into one room of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, a *flotilla* of paper boats (or frog hats) folded in newspaper occupies the whole floor. The name of the work is *500 Frog Poems: (The Described/The Undescribed) Mackerel Sky for E.S.* Approximately that number of boats/hats stand in for about '500 species of tree frogs found throughout the world' according to the label at the entrance which briefly describes the frogs' sizes and geographical habitats. In the other room is *Green Pisser: 18 Frog Poems 18 Constructions. A Homage to Ivan Puni* consisting of a formation of budgerigar bird-boxes (or dovecotes) facing outward and attached to the wall. A list of taxonomic names for frog species appears on two laminated sheets inside the room and the title label is once again in the hall, at the entrance.

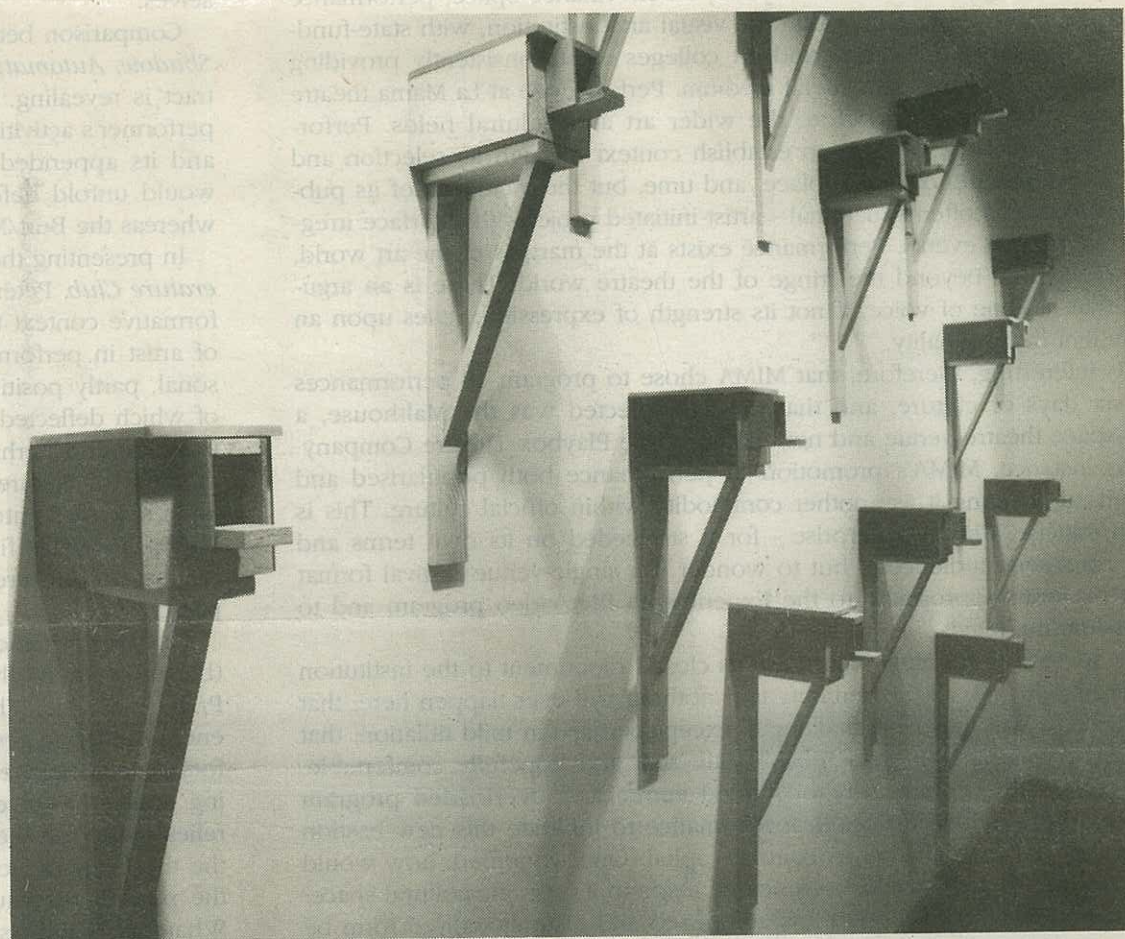
Confusions in the relationship between language and its referents are the warp and weft of MacPherson's *oeuvre* of *Frog Poems*, whereby meanings are not fixed but are continually in formation. MacPherson's work can thus be thought of as a prolegomena towards an amphibology of meaning¹ in the area of object-based art, in the sense that meanings are amphibious, slipping in and out of the confinements set by language and the formal constructions of art. This is a difficult proposition.

While it may be a truism to observe that the world is structured in and by language (making experience possible) it seems to be the work of this artist to conceive of the *limit* of language as oscillating, fluid, a border contested by objects and by *nature* among other things. It is a voiceless place where action must occur through mutation and accretion. Collection and assembly of things, and applying the name to the work are the artist's primary activities.

Often MacPherson's work is regarded as *dry*, yet it is more precisely *littoral* (of or on the shore) as is suggested by the Latin designation *litoria* for various species of frog. MacPherson's earlier gesture of making a case for a can of paint as a painting exemplifies a strategy which tests formalisations by taking them *too literally*.

The fact that the assembled objects appear in formation might suggest that information occurs in the work of art. But though the composition of these works is informed by the didactic display of natural history specimens, this functional logic relates to the work of art in an abstract way: all the more so because of the absence of its natural amphibious subjects, the frogs, as *ordinary* referents. Corresponding to a total loss of resolution in its field, the *true* informing structure is brought into focus at very close range. It is not an entirely positive set of principles which determines MacPherson's work, and it is not a safe and inactive *aesthetic* structure that results from the process of abstraction. In spite of their muteness, the rigid formations in which the objects are arranged have overtones of militarism and surveillance.

'Literal statements often contain violent analogies.'² A capacity for violence and coercion that exists in the relations between language and



Robert MacPherson, *Green Pisser: 18 Frog Poems 18 Constructions. A Homage to Ivan Puni. 1987-1989.*

things figures as a matter of ongoing concern in MacPherson's work. This was possibly at a peak in the piece where a chainsaw was exhibited as a *Frog Poem* in the recent exhibition *Inland*, at ACCA. Other objects chosen for arrangement as *Frog Poems* have carried with them senses of confinement or the occupation of territory. Here, in *18 Frog Poems 18 Constructions* the crude, pulped and riveted construction of the bird-boxes, each bearing a small yellow price-sticker, gives the appearance of a trap of some kind. By force of habit, much in the same way that certain birds fly towards the openings of dovecotes, inside the gallery our thoughts are coaxed towards label and objects as sources of meaning.

The idea of a one-way flow of information implies a power relationship. It is this process which is problematised and disrupted in MacPherson's *Frog Poems*. The colonising power of a newspaper's dual function of disseminating and inhibiting information (which becomes instrumental in the production of a governable subject) is read into *500 Frog Poems*. It is also present in the logic of the bird-boxes which is complicit with the construction of its other, *natural* readership. In view of the proposition that resistance is already inscribed in all power relationships and is 'never in a position of exteriority in relation to power'³ the words do more than

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