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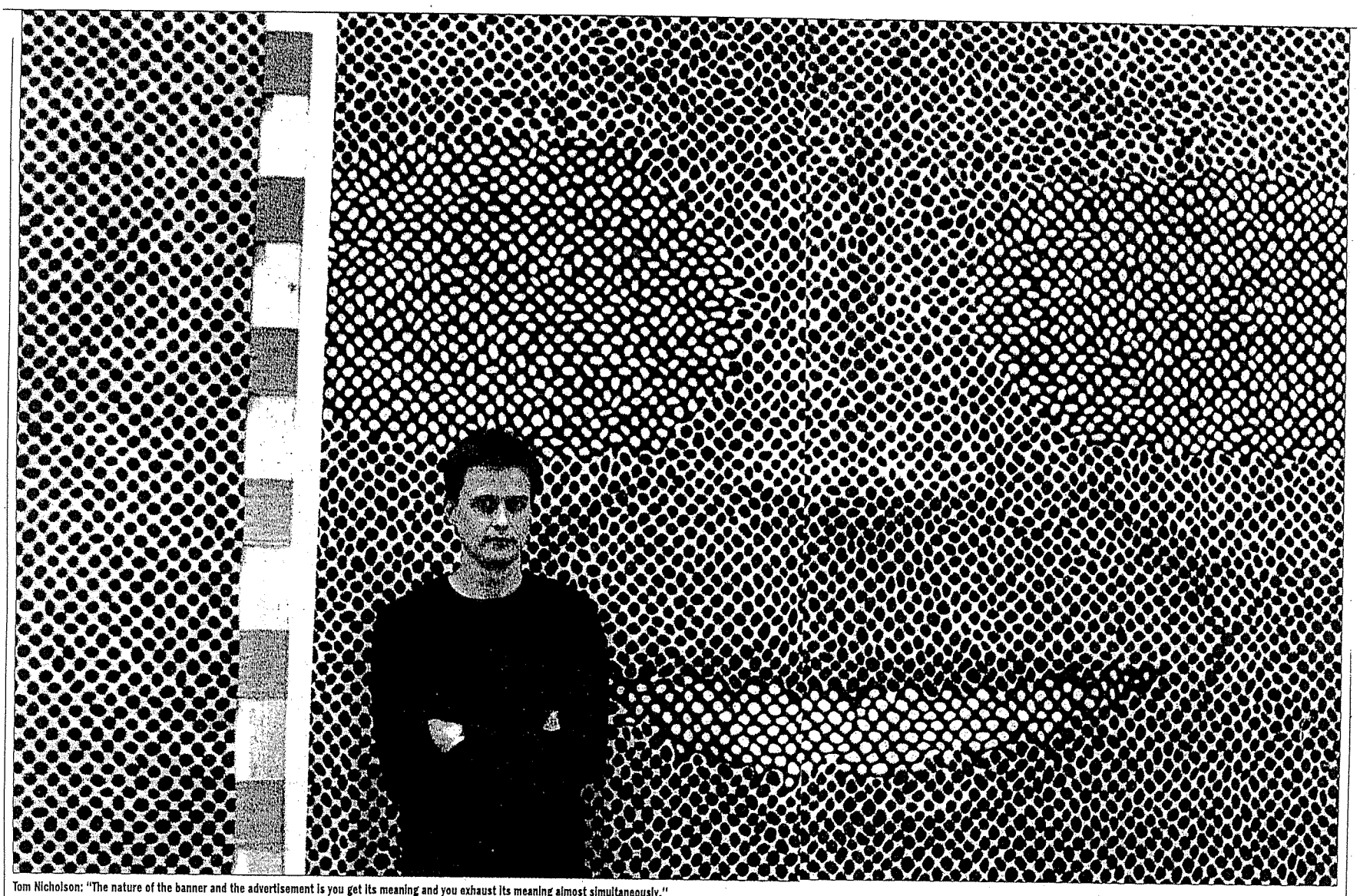

Tom Nicholson: "The nature of the banner and the advertisement is you get its meaning and you exhaust its meaning almost simultaneously."

PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

New map of the human art

A 20th-century memorial has sparked current issues, writes **Megan Backhouse.**

They were as small as a display ad could be. All black, save for the nondescript typeface outlining a banner march for that day at dawn. They appeared in *The Age* over six consecutive mornings in February but, quite possibly, you missed them. Even if one did happen to catch your eye, it's a safe bet that that morning had long since broken.

Never mind, you can see them now anyway, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. The news pages where the advertisements were placed are printed as negatives (like microfiche archives) and lined up atop trestle tables beside (and the link soon becomes apparent) digital prints of boundary lines between various countries.

Cast your eyes up from these tiny, cryptic and white ads, "Banner march Melbourne (USSR/Afghanistan, 13 June 1946) 22 February 2004 Dawn Meet Flagstaff Gardens", and you see huge video projections of vast canvas banners being paraded along roads, parks, the beach. The banners themselves are at ACCA too, beaming their broken-up images of black and beige smiling faces.

Artist Tom Nicholson says he never imagined that the newspaper ads would bring in marchers and that, similarly, the marches were never intended to serve the usual role of an issue-based demonstration. There was no issue, as such, though that's not to say the ads, banners, marches and videos were without purpose. Nicholson describes his installation, called *Seven Days*, and included in the group show *NEW04*, as a memorial to the legacy of the 20th century.

While the advertisements served as "a kind of play with the way art doesn't occupy a plausible place in real time", Nicholson says they also helped forge a relationship between events of the past and news of the day. Noting various national boundaries introduced in the past 100 years becomes an indirect way of outlining history (colonialism, wars, the dissolution of the Soviet Union). And, by noting them in the newspaper, stories of the past are pitted against contemporary tales of burning oilfields in Iraq, Redfern riots, striking printers.

Each of the marches — seven in all, including one bannerless rally at dusk — followed the line of a national boundary. Nicholson redrew the twists and turns of selected borders (he's come up with 500-odd boundaries introduced throughout the 20th century) as closely as he could over walkable areas of inner-city Melbourne.

He didn't want there to be literal associations between the areas traversed and the countries represented (a Vietnamese boundary mapped over Footscray, say) and preferred to maintain a sense of incongruity. "I wanted

I wanted two histories that don't belong together, just sitting side by side.

two histories that don't belong together, just sitting side by side. The thing about the conventional march is that the meaning is so much determined by the route it takes, like you walk from the Trades Hall up to Parliament, but I was trying to make a march where the meaning actually came from the space outside the physical space," he says.

"I am trying to pull the idea of the march out of the idea of efficacy, where the march is a means to an ends. Here, the march doesn't have an immediate objective. I think of them as being memorial actions and, in that sense, the demonstration that they're closest to is the annual Hiroshima memorial rally."

This memorial aspect also comes out in the images portrayed on the banners. The smiling faces have been inspired by communist propaganda (largely from the 1950s), as well as Western advertisements. "Advertisements and communist propaganda are almost identical in certain respects," Nicholson says, "and the smiling face is the point where the merging is most evident. I never lift them directly, but all these forms have been used in some way through the last 100 years; they are a cryptic archive of the past."

Cryptic also in the sense that the smiling face is not immediately apparent. The banners are vastly blown up digital prints of Nicholson's drawings. "Part of the attraction is to try to make a banner that doesn't work as propaganda, because I guess the nature of the banner and the advertisement is you get its meaning and you exhaust its meaning almost simultaneously. I was trying to make a banner that didn't function that way, which is mutinous or doesn't resolve itself into a fixed meaning."

There's nothing fixed about Nicholson's installation. In a sense, the work has two lives — its life as street marches in February and then what he calls "the residue" — the maps of boundaries, videos, banners — at ACCA. "I guess I am interested in the way those residues relate to the action itself, and it's connected to the idea of memory retrieval. The (residue) objects relate to the immediate past — being used in Melbourne — but they also suggest a relationship to a wider past."

Nicholson is one of seven up-and-coming Melbourne artists represented in *NEW04*, which has been curated by Geraldine Barlow and features specially commissioned works. The other artists are Anthony Hunt and Stephen Honegger (working together), Guy Benfield, Nadine Christensen, Sangeeta Sandrasegar and Parekohai Whakamoe. The *NEW* exhibition is an annual event, compiled by different curators. Barlow says that, this year, she wanted to stage an exhibition that highlighted the "breadth of perspective" in local contemporary art and also presented pieces that "worked off each other". Each of the artists makes some sort of exploration of the past, whether it be art history, Japanese myths, family backgrounds or new technology.

NEW04 is at ACCA (111 Sturt Street, Southbank. Phone 9697 9999) until May 16.