

Reflecting on art's paradoxes

From German modernity to street protests, **Robert Nelson** looks back on an intriguing year in art.

THE anxiety and financial gloom that have spread through Europe and America force us to revisit history with renewed horror. Apprehensively, the public grapples with economic theory and tries to match contemporary realities with past experience. The way that we talk of the present sounds alarmingly like history.

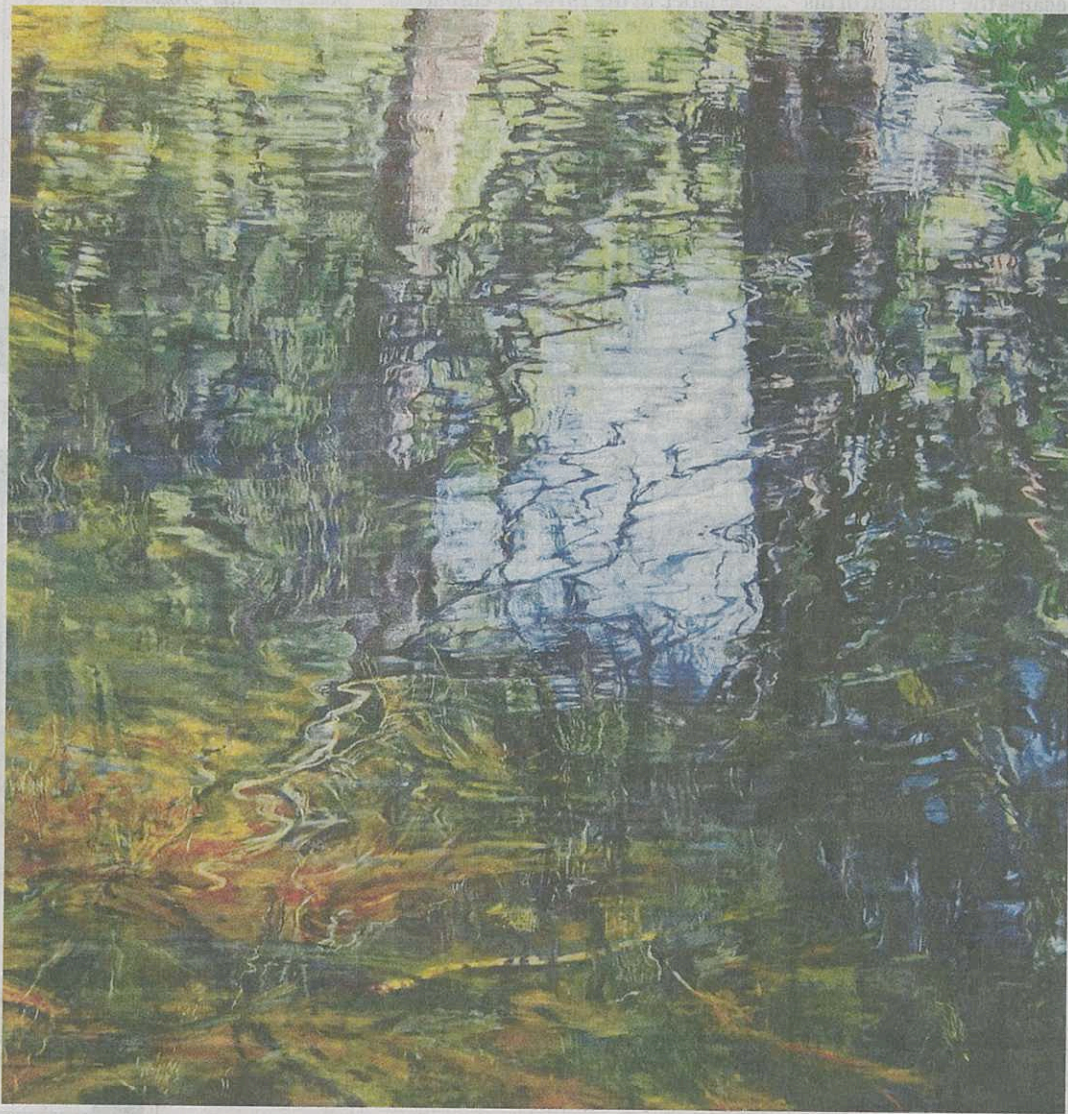
Fortuitously, I think, the NGV has recently focused on the time and location of the greatest social scars that the European nations have inflicted on themselves. Last year, German art of the most traumatic decades was seen through the collection of the Staedel Museum; this year, the NGV staged *Vienna: Art & Design* and now *The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-37*.

All of history is scary and fraught, but these epochs represent so poignantly how freedom and creative potential — explored with unprecedented sophistication — were dashed amid war, depression and genocide. It's as if the NGV knew that we didn't need another show about impressionism just now; we have other things to worry about, such as what makes a society stable and fair in an age of international resentment.

It would be overstating the case to suggest that the year in art had a single theme unifying its many vibrant and disparate exhibitions. As in any year, only a few shows directly touched on politics or social movements. But for me, many of the most memorable did.

The foremost was Yael Bartana's... and Europe will be stunned at ACCA. Bartana created a trilogy of films proposing that Jews might repatriate themselves to Poland, from which they'd fled during the Holocaust. In the course of this creation, the fiction became a reality, as a social movement formed under the title of the Jewish Renaissance in Poland Movement.

Despite the bewildering spread of themes throughout the year, there is, I think, a dis-



Standout works from 2011 include Lynn Miller's *Kangaroo Valley - Sawyers Creek*.

tinguishable trend. From the blockbusters to the artist-run initiatives, the focus has shifted from art as object to art as social project. Rightly or wrongly, the emphasis on the autonomous creation of individuals is giving way to networked artists who see their work as forming a community. Judging by a beautiful show at the Monash Gallery of Art, *Brummels*, this social energy has precursors in the 1970s.

Contemporary artists such as Tom Nicholson at Anna Schwartz Gallery invited the participation of viewers. Nicholson's work also dealt with public space, a theme that was helpfully explored by Nathan Coley at ACCA and Callum Morton at Heide, plus a suite of shows in the Melbourne Festival, especially *In Camera and in Public* at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, *Intimate Publics* at Fehily Con-

temporary, Vernon Ah Kee and Harun Farocki at Gertrude Contemporary, and AES+F in our city streets.

The scene is big enough to provide memorable examples across the genres: in painting, Lynn Miller at Jenny Port Gallery, Mary Tonkin at Australian Galleries and Ron Francis at Scott Livesey; in metal, Robert

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Baines at Glen Eira Council Gallery; in glass, Tony Hanning at Kirra Galleries.

These hardy exponents of a beloved medium prove that individual artists can still do special things alone in the studio or field. But the mood among many younger artists favours a different approach to

art, a user-generated process, where the artist, drawing upon networks, uses a space for interaction. Networks themselves featured in a fascinating exhibition at Monash University Museum of Art. And even if you look at photographers such as Patricia Piccinini at the CCP or Darren Siwes at Nellie Castan, or Shaun Gladwell in video at ACMI, all involve collaboration or community in their production.

Since the publication of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* in 1998, you can sense the terms of artistic interest and prestige slowly changing. Instead of seeing art as the product of a unique individual author, relational art prefers the idea of works springing up in dialogue with the user, referring to the social context that artists share.

This broadening — and at times dulling — of inspiration has many antecedents from Dada onward, which cultivated a less proprietorial view of artistic imagination. Today, fewer and fewer artists (especially in art schools) have faith in the organic development of an artist's poetic imagination within a medium. It's begrudgingly honoured but seen as less than contemporary. Young artists these days are more likely to see exclusive dedication to a medium as insular and retrograde, structured around a product rather than social relations or theory.

Alas, the problems with relational art are as big as the theory that supports it. There was once a time when artists immersed themselves in a medium and satisfyingly concentrated on poetic invention within it. As artists abandon the techniques and discipline of a medium and see their role as social facilitators and theorists, they have less and less chance to make a contribution to visual language. They tend not to come up with things that are interesting to look at.

It sometimes happens with relational art that the ideas in the catalogue are interesting but the work of art as object or space or performance is forgettable and unreviewable. And here's the paradox: relational art is boring to those who don't have a relation to the artists who make it.

Meanwhile, the public relates strongly to autonomous pictures on a wall that are created by a unique maker. And part of the reason that Yael Bartana's relational project is so compelling is that it has good cinematography and good filmic craftsmanship.

But there was one ramshackle piece of relational art that I thought really did have enormous potential: Occupy Melbourne. Artists were involved in this movement both here and internationally; overseas, the symbolic gesture attracted charismatic speakers. In Australia, the reaction was incurious, philistine and brutal; but in New York, the theorist Slavoj Žižek spoke eloquently about the point of Occupy Wall Street: "We are allowed to think about alternatives," he said. If art could make space for that to happen, it's performing a valuable function and a good year's work.

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