

3 INSTALLATIONS

NOELENE LUCAS

ROSS MELLICK

ROBERT OWEN

Introduction

The architecture of the Project Gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales naturally forms three rooms. It is then a pragmatic rather than metaphysical choice to invite three artists to make installations. The artists have accepted the spaces in their most logical configurations without making enclosed boxes to shield their work from surrounding visual and acoustic pollution. Enclosed spaces have been a problem that we have encountered when trying to include diverse works in larger group shows, where each attempts to generate its own ambience in the saturated environment.

However, it only becomes possible for these installations to work together because of their relatively quiet and contemplative nature. There is also a certain harmony in their feeling even though their forms are utterly divergent. It is often easier to exclude shared theoretical models for a group than it is to identify communality. In this case it is clear that none of the artists are primarily concerned with installation as a critical deconstruction of either the physical context or the institutional context of its presentation. This is not to say that they are not conscious of the problems of context but rather that their concerns are beyond such critical/conceptual frames of reference. Neither is their work attempting to deconstruct traditional modes of representation, indeed Mellick and Lucas could best be described as sculptors in a quite conventional sense.

Owen has worked with painting, photography, sculpture and installed combinations of all these forms. Even "Appositions" 1979, which does play a conceptual game with visual languages, (a stool becomes the subject of a series of polaroid photos which form the basis of a painting which in turn is reproduced by an installation of replica stools), has a profound poetic reading which leads well beyond a conceptual formula such as Kosuth's definitions.

Installation makes use of space to engage the viewer in an actual kinaesthetic experience. It can not be an isolated object to be considered complete in itself. In this sense it is a contingent art. Above all it depends upon the viewer's use of the space. To varying degrees these artists are concerned with making places for contemplation. When the audience enters the room there is a different subjective time. The noise of the world is for a moment stilled, allowing a reflective pause,

T.S. Elliott's still point in a turning world. Each artist creates a given ambience. It is not hostile to daily life. On the contrary it draws its meaning from lived experience. It is the attention of the viewer which is changed.

The key to all art is this capacity to engage the viewer in an active mental process so that their own imagination and memory are complicit in the realisation of the work. It is this which makes the art experience such a potentially empathic one.

All three of the artists find cultural metaphors from outside the western tradition even though they work their final solutions within the framework of modernism. Robert Owen has often invoked the strong focusing device of the altar in his installations but equally powerful is the image of the ring or pool which resonates with the temporal force of a source of energy. The point from which power flows. This has been used in many forms. In "Plain Images" 1981, he used a photograph of a lake disturbed only by a ring of ripples resulting from a thrown pebble. An Installation at the Coventry Gallery, "Hammer on Rock", 1982, consisted of a circle of blue pigment spot lit exactly so that only the blue glowed. On this pool of blue there was a rock on which a hammer rested. The room rang with the sound of a brass Tibetan bell. The sound waves circling out like the ripples in the lake.

In some recent works the circle on the floor has been made with glass so that it throws back the beam in fragments of light. It is like the eye of God in which the world exists through being seen. At the same time it is recognisably a pile of broken windscreen glass, a widely understood trace of violence and tragedy. Such contradictions keep Owen's forms from becoming simple signs for spiritual meditation.

Noelene Lucas seeks to describe a delicate balance between nature and culture. The materials she uses are often "found matter" including man made items as well as natural forms. Her compositions also play with this dual reading so that the regular repetition of lines can suggest a ploughed field or the ripples on a lake as much as it does the minimal grid.

In this installation she has made a series of identical domes which rise from a field of marble

chips. These chips can be read as natural ground or as formal contrivance. The presence of sea shells sways the balance towards nature while the regular grid of hemispheres suggests some unfamiliar cityscape although it could equally be an enlarged view of some fabulous reptile's skin.

By working with the gravitational imperative of the floor plane Lucas opens analogies with landscape. Like the Japanese rock gardens at Kyoto they create a mental landscape not by imitation but as a kind of abstraction. Although the relief is relatively shallow she manages with the aid of light, to animate the surrounding space creating an atmosphere in the entire room which transports the viewer's imagination in contemplation of a greater reality.

Mellick's vessels suggest two complementary metaphysical journeys. The egg-raft is carried

passively with its hidden cargo incubating within the egg form, an ancient symbol of the cosmos, while the bird-boat is carried along by the nature of its invisible cargo upon a trajectory sensed and directed by an inward reaching antenna. Mellick seeks images which absorb distant horizons within the human refusing any sense of the remote ideal.

The exhibition will entail the viewer moving between three distinct spaces which have certain metaphysical concerns in common although they are unrelated in form and conceptual orientation. Owen's field of energy and "celestial" surveillance, Lucas' garden of meditation and Mellick's images of the extended body and the rites of passage.

ANTHONY BOND

ROBERT OWEN
ECHO

Robert Owen

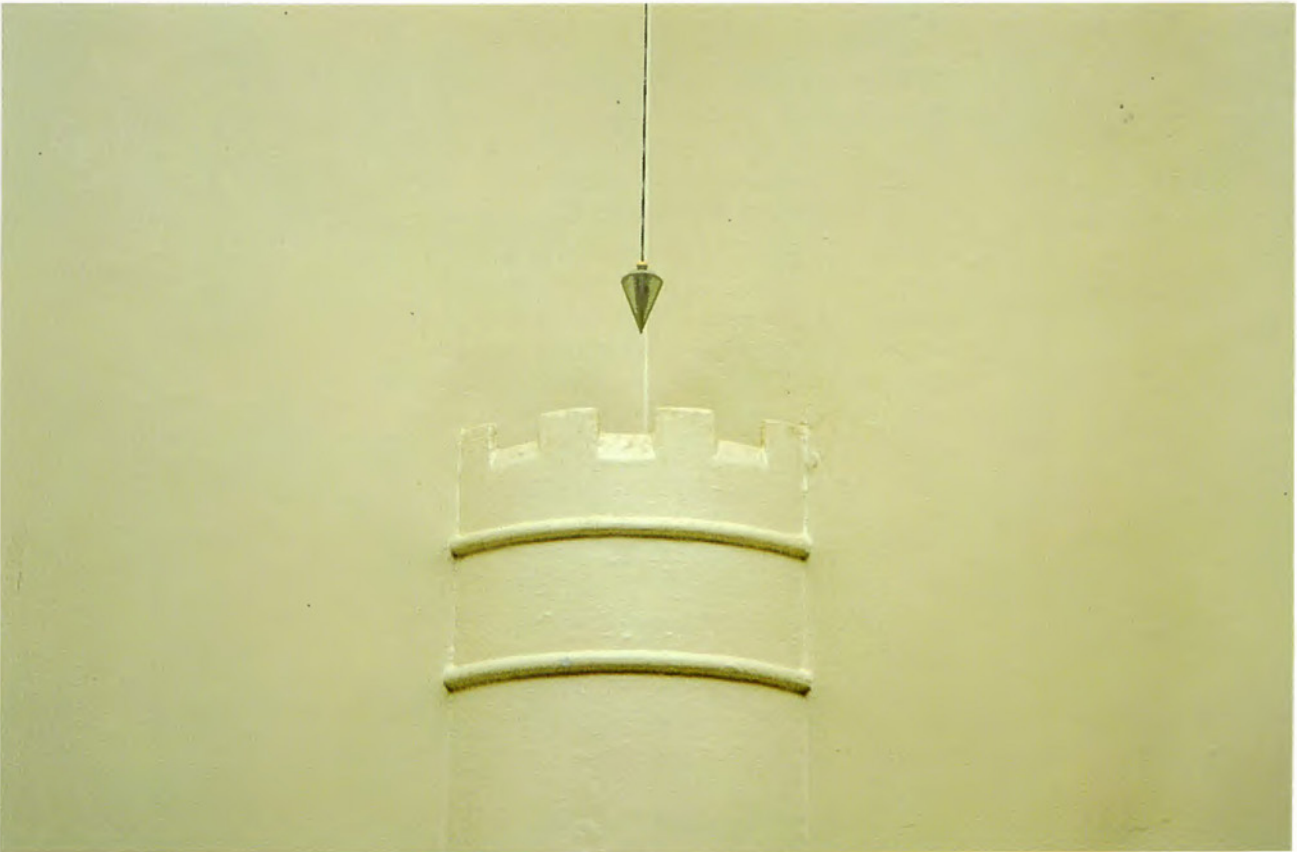
By JOHN BARBOUR

'Fractal geometry' is a term coined by Benoit Mandelbrot to describe hierarchies that manifest identical features at successive levels. Thus, for example, coastlines exhibit the same irregularities over increasingly smaller areas as they are observed from closer and closer at hand. The concept applies equally to all 'objects' observed, whether galaxies or human tissue.

The first two installations in the series of which the present exhibition is a part shared the title *A Warring Peace; A Sweet Wound; A Mild Evil*, a title that indicated a theme of tension between opposites. Indeed it is the 'between' that fascinates Owen. Each of the nouns – 'peace', 'wound' and 'evil' – is gently displaced by a qualifying contradictory term – one that both subverts and transforms it. There is also implied the notion of the dependence of opposites upon each other.

This chain of paradoxes, the linking of positive and negative, is embodied at every level of Owen's work. The gallery so dramatically transformed, for example, is to be read as a site for the production of energy, as well as for the circulation of existing energies – as a terminal in a circuit of other galleries, other works, exhibitions. *Echo*, the title of the present exhibition, also implies the 'between' call and response – a diminishing series of reverberations of some past event. Again, – the image of the lake – "Tui is the Lake, which rejoices and refreshes all living things. Furthermore, Tui is the mouth". Images of lakes replenishing one another; the lake of blue pigment echoes the photograph, the two urns joined at the lip endlessly exchange their contents. At the one end of the gallery, a mound of glass jars, throats filled with water, radiates light which is thrown back and caught by a clear disk placed between the urns at the other end. And a thin strip of mirror runs along two walls at lip height to meet in a corner, fracturing space in four directions – inscribed upon it is the text – "I change, I am the same".

I am continually fascinated in this by the way in which Owen's work keeps the question of 'origin', of beginning and end, in suspense. A chain of signifiers – of images, of words spoken by mirrors. At the risk of belabouring the conceit, this strategy mirrors one of the essential operations of language as both writing and speech. It brings to mind the chain of supplements of the Derrida of *Of Grammatology*, Baudrillard's procession of simulacra and the parable of the chicken

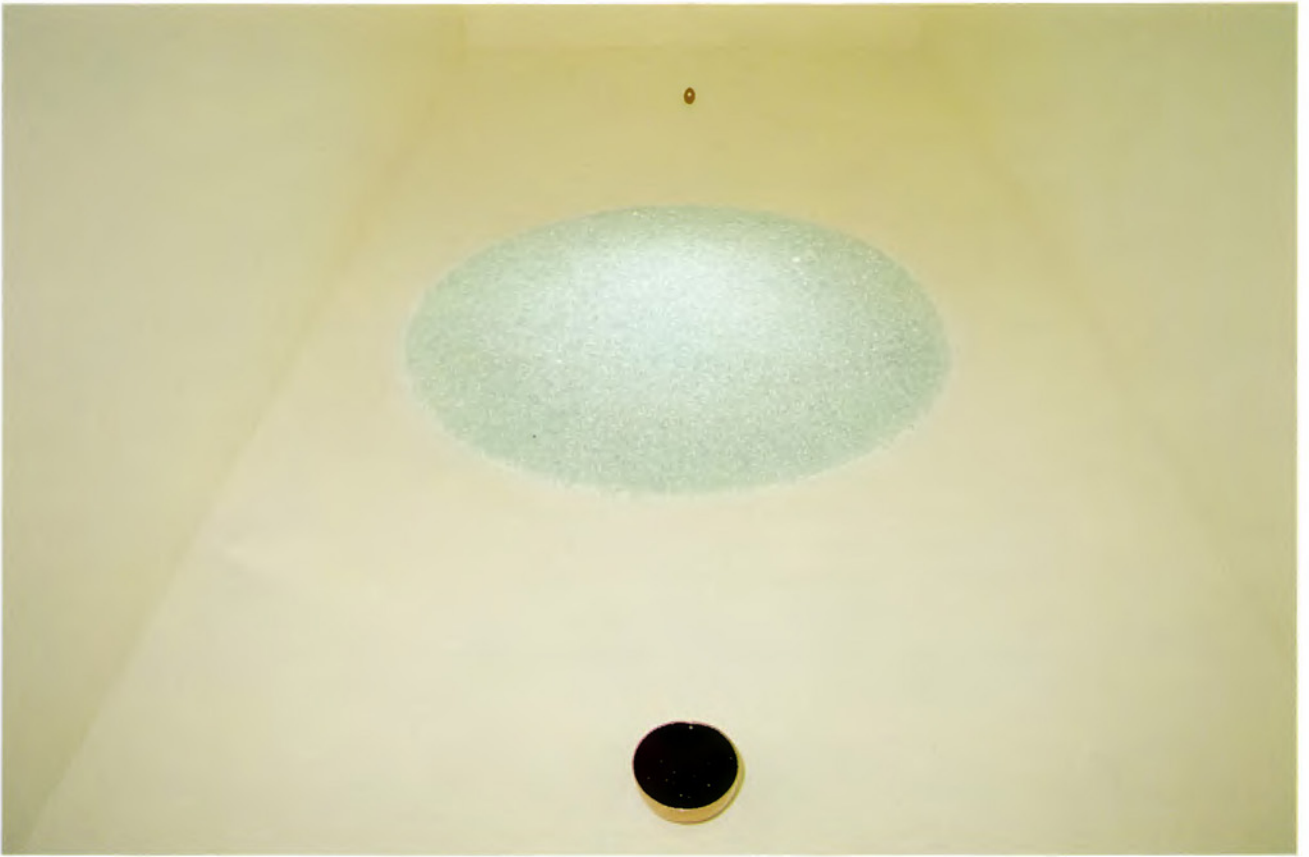


and the egg. It can also be read as both gnosis and Zen – what matters is not its denominational aspect, whether theory or religion, but the quality of the experience to which it gives rise.

Owen's art is 'of the senses', perhaps we might even say it is an art dedicated to the glorification of the senses. Those hallucinatory blues that appear variously as shadows and negative spaces; the gilded paraphernalia, the sheer density of materials, forms and textures – the way his work addresses sight, sound, smell, touch. Truly a material, art and an art of essences. He sings the body electric – not as some futuristic extrapolation of today's technology (although indeed some of his works, such as the sculptures made of cast-off mechanical bits and pieces, demonstrate the mentality of 'planned obsolescence') – but as 'life force', as made manifest in structure and process. This is not to say that Owen's practice is uninformed by other, perhaps more worldly concerns; by an acute consciousness, for example, of the commodity value of (his) art. But is most assuredly not a cynical consciousness, rather it is one based on a profound sensitivity to the environment and which is rooted in a sense that the task of developing an 'ecology of mind', as Gregory Bateson put it, grows daily more urgent.

'Recycling' – we know that word. It means saving your garbage. It's that injunction to help clean up the planet that requires of us a little more effort, intellectual application and consideration of effect. But there is also a sense in which it applies to the operations of the psyche: a sort of 'mental hygiene' perhaps? To return to Mandelbrot's concept of fractal geometry, Owen perceives difference in sameness. Nothing is wasted. He is always returning to develop further the implications of his ideas. And by attending ever more specifically to the material aspects their manifestation and placement – to duration, stasis, space, form, technology, and the structure of sensory and intellectual process – he affords his viewers the possibility of continually redefining their experience of his work. His art is the stone that shatters the surface of the lake to drift slowly down in our minds, the word that dispels silence only sink into silence. It sets off connections, flips the switch and alerts us to return with renewed sensitivity to the demands of our time.

JOHN BARBOUR



List of Illustrations

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ECHO, 1989

detail

floor; glass jars, water, (2m diameter approx)
stone, perspex, clay, pigment, (2m diameter approx)

wall; mirror and text, (8.5cm x 17.9m)
'Lake Tekapo' cibachrome print (953cm x 138cm framed) ambient sound loop
Monash University Gallery

bottom

AXIOM, 1987

(detail; lecture room A)

3 part installation;

Blue pigment, chrome plumb bobs, blue string

C type photographs

Ormond College, Melbourne University

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TRACE OF A SILENT BELL, 1988

Detail, interior

Tibetan bowl, ink, jasmine oil, glass, bronze 'egg' and light, (3m x 5m x 2m)

Palais du Rhin, Strasbourg

bottom

SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION, 1989

detail

glass crystal, steel and wood (20cm x 102cm x 117cm)

City Gallery, Melbourne

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ECHO, 1989

detail, (glass jars)

bottom

PHASE ZONE THREE (INTO THE LIGHT), 1987

detail, installation

floor; silver & gold leaf, oil lamps, pigment, jasmine oil, water

walls; oil & acrylic on canvas boards, charts, ambient sound tape.

Victorian College of the Arts Gallery

