

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PRESENT: MODELS FOR CONTEMPORARY SPACES ■ AN INSTALLATION BY DAVID BURNS

Plimsoll Gallery

Centre for the Arts

Hunter Street Hobart

25 Oct to 15 Nov 1991



ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The following quote may be useful as a reference point for entering into the discourse around which my current practice evolves.

"Modernity invests its trust in the power of the present moment as an origin, but discovers that, in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present. Nietzsche's text leads him irrevocably to this discovery, perhaps most strikingly (because most implicitly) when he comes close to describing his own function as a critical historian and discovers that the rejection of the past is not so much an act of forgetting as an act of critical judgment directed against himself.

[The critical student of the past] must possess the strength, and must at times apply this strength, to the destruction and dissolution of the past in order to be able to live. He achieves this by calling the past into court, putting it under indictment, and finally condemning it; any past, however, deserves to be condemned, for such is the condition of human affairs that they are ruled by violence and weakness...."It takes a great deal of strength to be able to live and forget to what extent life and injustice go together."..... But this very life that has to forget must also at times be able to stop forgetting; then it will become clear how illegitimate the existence of something, of a privilege, a cast or a dynasty actually is, and how much it deserves to be destroyed. Then the past is judged critically, attacked at its very roots with a sharp knife, and brutally cut down, regardless of established pieties. This is always a dangerous process, dangerous for life itself. Men and eras that serve life in this manner, by judging and destroying the past, are always dangerous and endangered. For we are inevitably the result of earlier generations and thus

the result of their mistakes, their passions and aberrations, even of their crimes; it is not possible to loosen oneself entirely from this chain.... Afterwards, we try to give ourselves a new past from which we should have liked to descend instead of the past from which we actually descended. But this is also dangerous, because it is so difficult to trace the limit of one's denial of the past, and because the newly invented nature is likely to be weaker than the previous one....⁷

The parricidal imagery of the passage, the weaker son condemning and killing the stronger father, reached the inherent paradox of the denial of history implied in modernity.

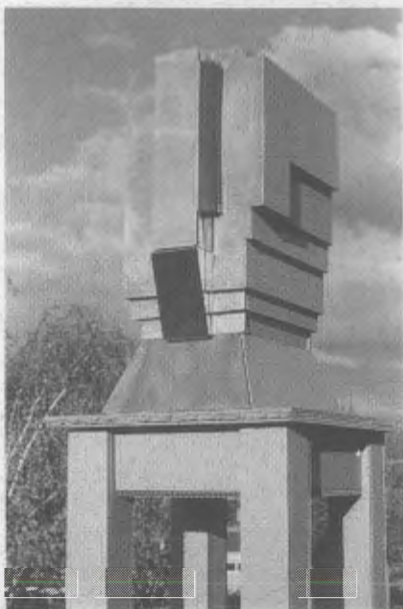
As soon as modernism becomes conscious of its own strategies - and cannot fail to do so if it is justified, as in this text, in the name of a concern for the future - it discovers itself to be a generative power that not only engenders history, but is part of a generative scheme that extends far back into the past. The image of the chain, to which Nietzsche instinctively resorts when he speaks of history, reveals this very clearly. Considered as a principle of life, modernity becomes a principle of origination and turns at once into a generative power that is itself historical. It becomes impossible to overcome history in the name of life or to forget the past in the name of modernity, because both are linked by a temporal chain that gives them a common destiny. Nietzsche finds it impossible to escape from history, and he finally has to bring the two incompatibles, history and modernity (now using the term in the full sense of a radical renewal), together in a paradox that cannot be resolved, an aporia that comes very close to describing the predicament of our own present modernity:

For the impulse that stands behind our history-oriented education - in radical inner contradiction to the spirit of a "new time" or a "modern spirit" - must in turn be understood historically; history itself must resolve the problem of history, historical knowledge must turn its weapon against itself - this threefold "must" is the imperative of the "new times," if they are to achieve something truly new, powerful, life-giving, and original.⁸

Only through history is history conquered; modernity now appears as the horizon of a historical process that has to remain a gamble. Nietzsche sees no assurance that his own reflective and historical attempt achieves any genuine change; he realizes that his text itself can be nothing but another historical document,⁹ and finally he has to delegate the power of renewal and modernity to a mythical entity called "youth" to which he can only recommend the effort of self-knowledge that has brought him to his own abdication"

Extract from *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* by Paul De Man. Pages 149-151, Second Edition, 1983, published by Methuen and Co. Ltd.

David Burns, 1991



INSTALLATION DETAILS: The installation comprises mixed media objects, cardboard, mirror laminex, photographs, copper, wood. Installation dimensions variable.

DAVID BURNS

Born Australia, 1959

Currently lives and works in Launceston, Tasmania

STUDIES

- 1977 Tertiary Orientation Program, Box Hill Technical College, Melbourne
- 1983-85 Bachelor of Arts, (Fine Art sculpture and print-making), Chisholm Institute of Technology, Melbourne
- 1986 New York Studio School, New York City, U.S.A
- 1986-87 Post Graduate degree, Fine Art, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne
- 1989-90 Graduate Degree in Education, Hawthorn Institute of Education, Melbourne

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *Fascia: Surface Structures*, 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1984 Fine Art Scholarship exhibition, Chisholm Institute of Technology, Melbourne
- 1985 Graduate exhibition, Chisholm Institute of Technology, Melbourne
- 1987 St. Kilda Arts Festival exhibition, Linden Gallery, Melbourne

- 1988 *Twelve Artists*, Victorian College of the Arts
Post Graduate exhibition, University Gallery,
Melbourne University
- 1989 Store Five Gallery, Melbourne
- 1990 *The Poverty of Production*, 343a Lygon Street Gallery,
Melbourne
Dis-Location, Story Hall, Royal Melbourne Institute
of Technology

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