

Brett Whiteley's studio

Ellie Schneider

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney



Photograph: Inside the Brett Whiteley Studio Ellie Schneider

The avant-garde art movement was undoubtedly a response to the progressive movements of the early twentieth century. The modernist period, and the apogee of bourgeois culture, prompted the conception of the avant-garde “whose role was as much sabotage as invention” (Watson, 2006: 992). The Brett Whiteley Studio, currently managed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, attributes Brett Whiteley (1939-1992) to the forefront of Australia’s avant-garde art movement. Located in Surry Hills, Sydney, this unique space has experienced a transformation from stables, to factory, to Whiteley’s workplace and residence, to its current design as exhibition space. On venturing through the space, the visitor is involved in his unfinished works, art equipment and memorabilia that demonstrate Whiteley’s original responses to his environment. At the heart of the avant-garde was the vital development of “new attitudes and institutions compatible with the new phase of Modernity” (Smith, 1998: 20). This facilitates the gallery experience “as a monumental creation in its own right, a cultural artifact” (Pearce, 2004: 280). Production of the site lends itself to realism, “the art of making reality” (Lyotard, 1997: 91) and inevitably postmodern thought as “reality will be changed; making, knowing, and know-how will be changed” (Lyotard, 1997: 91).

The enshrining of Whiteley’s workplace and residence owes itself to the vast circulation of his images, which continue to fetch high prices. The exhibition at the Brett Whiteley Studio

changes regularly, a process that involves “architecture, programmed displays of art objects, and highly rationalized installation practices” (Pearce, 2004: 280). As it fills its declared purpose as gallery, or museum, it carries out broad and often insidious “political and ideological tasks” (Pearce, 2004: 280). The Studio thus inhibits “a space subject to the increasing excesses of the late modern in all its ambiguity” (Prior, 2002: 3). It validates modernity as a process of commodification, and postmodern society as a site of imploding boundaries involving the proliferation of signs. This resonates with Baudrillard’s theorizing modernity in terms of the system of objects and the consumer society as well as Jameson’s discussion of the “prodigious expansion of culture” (Jameson, 1984: 7). The Studio then, allows us to consider “the implosion of the subject/object distinction” (Genosko, 1999: 23), where the individual can be seen as the ultimate product. This raises an interesting juxtaposition; Whiteley’s memory is preserved in the site yet the impermanent exhibitions allow him to become “undoubtedly transitory” (Lyotard, 1997: 93).

Born out of the cities of the nineteenth century, which had seen a rise of professional society, modernization- the social and economic processes of modernity- based its ontology upon the idea of progress, with its eye on the immediate future. The popular attitude of renouncing the recent past was motivated by drastic and far-reaching changes in Western society. Modernism, which developed as a reaction, and cultural critique of modernity, sought to achieve a new consciousness about contemporary experiences. It saw an explosion of the “ambiguous and uncertain open ended nature of reality” (Featherstone, 1991: 7). Thus, the modernist period sees a break with conventional boundaries of representation, “to see how reality could be portrayed, rather than seeking to replicate nature like the human eye and the camera” (O’Donnell, 2003: 14). This is indicative of a move “away from a belief in a world of ideas or substances which may be objectively known in themselves” (Connor, 1997: 115) and a reaction to the cities of the nineteenth century where science had arguably deduced the world of meaning. Art became the means through which “to describe the state of affairs, to assess and criticise it, and, if possible to redeem it” (Watson, 2006: 992).

The apprehension and dissatisfaction with a seemingly obsolete world manifest in the individual consciousness to be viewed as the foundation for knowledge and experience. Reality was no longer portrayed “slavishly and photographically” (O’Donnell, 2003: 14) as seen with Whiteley’s free-flowing, expressive lines creating movement and energy. This non-representationalism, both “self-conscious and intuitive” (Watson, 2006: 997) reflects how the modernist period “became both a celebration and a condemnation of the modern” (Watson, 2006: 991). It enables new depths in mental and emotional association with experimental forms, both absurd and meaningless, and embraces “visual emblems of ‘newness’” (Watson, 2006: 991). This imaginary in realism has encouraged modernism to be understood as the aesthetic counterpart of Freud’s unconscious, “concerned with the inner state, and with an attempt to resolve the modern incoherence” (Watson, 2006: 997). It is suggested in Whiteley’s themes of distorted, abstract nudes and primitive shapes, works that often scream “sex, violence and satire... the prevailing features of the figurative art of the 1960s” (Smith, 1992: 400).

Kant’s position that the self-constituted elite would usher humanity toward the ‘next stage’ of knowledge, is characteristic of the modernist avant-garde. It involved new forms of artistic expression to “provoke the public into perceiving modern reality differently through new art” (Walz, 2008: 58). Significance was placed on aesthetic introspection and self-consciousness became the salient characteristic of modernism. This was revealed through experimentation

with form that confirmed an avant-garde hostility towards the received forms in the arts. It is seen in various proportions within the gallery space which allows for an appreciation of the conflicting positions of abstract expressionism and pop painting, which envelop Whiteley's works. Often utilizing mixed media, for example, 'Giraffe no 1 c. 1965' and 'Ch'uan c. 1978-79' which includes oil, branch, nest and egg on canvas, Whiteley shuns the mimetic approach to representation. In other works, advertisements and product packaging can be spotted. Taking for instance, a brightly coloured Bex pills wrap, reveals an intention to question rather than exploit cultural codes.

As intellectual historian Eugene Lunn has articulated, the four broad dimensions to the modernist aesthetic include self-reflexivity, simultaneity, uncertainty of meaning, and dehumanization (Lunn, 1982: 34-7). This often brought to the fore "works of art that express modernity in all of its contradictions" (Walz, 2008: 10). The self-consciousness of modernism, for instance, is matched by the decentering of the subject indicating a crisis of the subject and object. Although these features are appropriated into various definitions of postmodernism, further emphasis is placed on the de-constructed, de-humanized subject, "the decline of the originality" (Featherstone, 1991: 8), the mixing of codes and the collapse of the hierarchal dichotomy between high and low culture. It is thus appropriate that rather than historical epochs, the modern and postmodern be understood as particular kinds of time consciousness associated with certain attitudes and institutions.

The objective for artists of the avant-garde, such as Whiteley, was often the traditional modernist one, of defamiliarization and the rejection of tradition, "to escape the conflagration of the system and its ashes" (Lyotard, 1997: 84). The desire to ridicule and disturb bourgeois taste and sensibility was often carried to extravagant lengths. Within the broad movement of modernism, the avant-garde functioned "as the political and revolutionary cutting-edge" (Murphy, 1999: 3), questioning the presuppositions of modernism itself. In doing so it destabilized realistic representation and subverted "the epistemological and ideological assumptions which underpin it" (Murphy, 1999: 15). In this way, the avant-garde can be understood as "guided by a more radical postmodernist epistemology" (Butler, 2002: 66). It illustrated the "fleeting experiences of the city-short, intense, accidental and arbitrary" (Watson, 2006: 991) and anticipated postmodernism in "deconstructing and re-writing the established images and constructions of the world" (Murphy, 1999: 4). Ironically, whilst the avant-garde artists are regarded as positioning a theoretical opposition to art as an institution, they worked in "a dialectical interplay with an institution upon which they depended" (Smith, 1998: 27).

Against the backdrop of a free market for art, the dialectic interaction of art in the special and general sense was continually played out. Under the conditions of modernity, the unrestrained diversity of art was celebrated, anticipating the postmodernist claim of blurred boundaries. This delimits a field within modernity in which art becomes increasingly autonomous yet threatened at all times by external factors. The art that evolved during the hegemony of this period developed as "an anti-didactic, post-Kantian, relatively autonomous experience" (Smith, 1998: 274). The push is made however, that modernism's obsession with novelty manifest in change to be viewed as desirable for its own sake. Often defined as a 'break with tradition', arguably modernity became the tradition itself. As postmodern theorist Baudrillard suggests, bit by bit "[modernity] loses all the substantial value of progress which underlay it at the beginning, in order to become an aesthetic of change for change's sake" (Kumer, 1995: 100). The postmodern was thus grown from the ground of modernity, fertilized by an urgency of significant reconceptualisation. It is here that postmodernism can be understood as

modernism galvanized into action, pulling apart the barriers between the different realms of society- political, economic, social and cultural. This often resonates with the writings of Marx, produced in the nineteenth-century. However, unlike the Marxists, postmodern theory does not deny “the irreducible pluralism and diversity of contemporary society”. As such, it argues “a more or less random, directionless flux” (Kumer, 1995: 102) leading to a postmodern condition of fragmentation.

The shift toward secularism, notably since the enlightenment, has enabled truths to belong to sites that are “self evident to reason, rooted in experience and empirically verifiable” (Pearce, 2004: 281). Akin to traditional religious sites, the gallery space “is carefully marked off and culturally designated as special” (Pearce, 2004: 281). With the mid twentieth century, came a renewed confidence in material progress, a “cultural awaking and coming of age” (Catalano, 1981: 13) that necessitated public speculation on the nature of the Australian experience. Akin to most Western nations, Australia shared in the prevalent post-war angst and it was through the Arts that a sense of anxiety was asserted. Yet the Brett Whiteley Studio, opened to the public in 1995, currently helps unite the community as a whole into a civic body by instilling its visitor’s with a sense of pride and loyalty. It facilitates the setting for “a specific kind of secular ritual” (Corsane, 2005: 78), which belongs decisively to the realm of secular knowledge. The Studio functions as preservers of the community’s cultural heritage, and more so, preserves of the community’s “official cultural memory” (Corsane, 2005: 79). At the same it, it raises concerns on the institution of an art gallery, its ability to mobilize interests of the nation-state and provide a powerful cultural base where “official ideologies” can be made and remade (Prior, 2002: 38). The artist’s social practice and the social and institutional conditions of art must be considered. Arguably, on Whiteley’s death in June 1992, “the media made a mocking meal of him” (Dickins, 2002: 8). Fitting, is the debate surrounding the function of the subject or self. It is with the postmodern that the self is no longer treated as unique, “prior to the acts it performs” (Butler, 2002: 108), but instead, is determined by a series of systems. The Kantian, unifying ego, is replaced by the subject: “not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change” (Belsey, 1980: 132). The subject is ‘constituted’ by the ideologically driven discourses of power which predominate in the society they inhabit, and can not be set aside from the actual social conditions, as regarded by advocates of the kantian tradition.

The Whiteley Studio can be understood as a carefully constructed mode “of establishing identities, boundaries and subject positions” (Prior, 2002: 8). Baudrillard’s theory of implosion “describes a process of social entropy leading to a collapse of boundaries” (Berger, 1998: 296), where, in an era of “simulation” models replace the real (Baudrillard, 1988:166-184). The Studio is meticulously constructed as a reproduction of the space in which Whiteley worked, demonstrating how simulation and reality implodes. Here, we see the state of postmodern thought, “the crisis of modernity” (Lyotard, 1997: 101) where the logic of modernism is carried to its furthest reaches “exacerbating the structural tensions of society” (Featherstone, 1991: 8). The Studio then, renders Baudrillard’s claim that we have been inundated with an ‘an excess of reality’; there develops a blurring distinction between original and copies where false simulations are affirmed. On display are Whiteley’s collectibles and memorabilia suggesting the time in which he worked. In an interview between Andrew Olle and Brett Whiteley, February 22, 1990, Whiteley reflects “we were living at such a kind of joyful and experimental, existential sort of level”. The radio interview is presently heard via an old-fashioned telephone, placed accurately on a desk in the gallery space. The visitor is

instructed to pick-up the phone. This lends itself to Jameson's argument where time has been fragmented "into a series of perpetual presents" (Jameson, 1998: 20).

The Brett Whiteley Studio immortalizes the modernist avant-garde whilst stimulating postmodern thought of temporal disorder, detachment and cultural pluralism. Through the displayed works as well as the actual visitor experience, the space operates a dual purpose: it questions the role of the metanarratives of modernism, and forces the visitor to be subjected to postmodernism's "radical uncertainties" (Butler, 2002: 66). On adopting a critical attitude, the visitor is free to explore the space's range of possible meanings, omissions, contradictions and ambiguities; to reveal the assumptions of the artist as well as society. The visitor is allured by his provocative works of "distorted shapes and empty spaces" (Israel, 1997: 122) for which "we are enticed to fill in the gaps ourselves" (Israel, 1997: 122). The irony, owing to the postmodern, is that the space must be accepted as instituting the avant-garde discourse that functions as another system that seeks to explain the world.

References

- Baudrillard, J. Selected Writings, Stanford University Press, 1988
- Belsey, C. Critical Practice, Methuan & Co. Ltd, New York, 1980
- Berger, A. The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society, Rowman Altamira, US, 1998
- Butler, C. Postmodernism, A very short introduction, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002
- Catalino, G. The years of hope, Australian art and criticism 1959-1968, Ocford university Press, Melbourne, 1981
- Connor, S. Postmodernist Culture, An introduction to theories of the contemporary, Birkbeck College, London University, 1997
- Corsane, G. Heritage, Museums and Gakkeries, An introductory reader, Routledge, Oxon, 2005
- Dickins, B. black + whiteley, Hardy Grant Books, Victoria, Australia, 2002
- Featherstone, M. Consumer Culture and Postmodernism, Sage Publications Ltd, London, 1991
- Genosko, G. McLuhan And Baudrillard, The masters of implosion, Routledge, London, 1999
- Israel, G. Artwise, Jacaranda Wiley LTD, Qld, Australia, 1997
- Jameson, F. Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of Late Capitalism, 1984
- Jameson, F. The cultural turn: selected writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998, Verso, 1998
- Kant, I. An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?" Berlin Monthly, 1974
- Kumer, K. From Post-industrial to post-modern society: new theories of the contemporary world, Wiley-Blackwell, UK, 1995

- Lyotard, J. Postmodern Fables, University of Minnesota Press, Minnaeapolis, 1997
- Lunn, E. Marxism and Modernism, University of California Press, 1982
- Murphy, R. Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the problem of Postmodernity, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999
- O'Donnell, K. Postmodernism, Lion Publishing Plc, Oxford, 2003
- Pearce, S. Interpreting Objects and Collections, Routledge, London, 1994
- Prior, N. Museums & Modernity, Art Galleries and the making of modern culture, Berg, Oxford International Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 2002
- Smith, B. Australian Painting 1788-1990, Oxford University Press, Australia, 1992
- Smith, B. Modernism's History, University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Australia, 1998
- Walz, R. Modernism, Pearson Education Ltd, UK, 2008
- Watson, P. Ideas, a history from fire to freud, Orion Book Ltd, London, 2006