

## Ian Milliss interviewed by Lucas Ihlein

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LI *This is our starting point we'll be able to refer back to later on, like at the end of the process we'll be able to look back and say, 'we've come this far'.*

IM Yeah.

LI *So without having really done anything yet, this is where we're kind of at.*

IM Where we're starting at, that's right; and the other thing is you know how I was talking about wanting to do the first print as a newspaper page, right?

LI *Yeah.*

IM Apart from the fact that it refers to my own history where within a couple of years of doing this Yeomans stuff I was then spending all my time from the late 70's on designing newspapers for political groups and campaigns and things like that, so apart from being a reference to that the newspaper is not a bad format for doing this sort of thing.

And the other thing that's going on here is a bit of an exploration of all the different formats you can use to present the same set of information and research and so we've got the blog and we've got prints and there's different ways of doing prints and configuring information, and even the way the thing was originally going to be done back in the 70's, which was going to involve photographs, maps, videos, whatever, in a sense we're transferring all of that onto a blog, so it's a nice little investigation of different ways of presenting the same information, and the way there are different appropriate ways of doing things and presenting information at different points in time. I

t makes the point that in fact the underlying meaning of apparently very different things can really be very similar, even though they look totally different, even though they may be fifty years apart. So it's a nice way of playing around with all of that a bit, I reckon.

LI *Yep - okay, so I guess my questions are really kind of basic stuff, I thought it would be good to try and think about these now because the more that we go into this the more difficult it might be to remember what these starting positions were, so for example the first question would be - I don't even know if you can remember this, but when did you even first become aware of Yeomans?*

IM Yeah, that's interesting. In a sense, if I do a little bit of research I'll be able to date it because I know that strangely enough the very first thing I ever bought by him was *The City Forest* booklet, which I don't think was published until 1972 or '73. I know it's very hard to find these things afterwards, to actually go back and find the information on these things, but probably what attracted me to that was things like the Victoria Street squats. I was reading more then about planning and urban stuff in general of one sort or another, and I have this hazy memory of stumbling across that booklet at Bob Gould's shop. So from that I started chasing up Yeoman's other books. But I mean it wouldn't have happened if I didn't already have really well established interest in gardens and gardening and farming and stuff like that.

LI *You did have an interest?*

IM Oh yeah, I spent a lot of my teens running around heritage houses, long before they'd turned into the sort of heritage tourist things they are now, they were just ruins half of them or had people living in them, hadn't been turned into museums and so I ran around a lot of those and also I ran around a lot of gardens. It was funny because these were the days when there weren't many books on any of that stuff and so it was a hard thing to actually even find where

they were and find which ones might be interesting to go to, but I did actually spend a lot of time doing that, for one reason or another. So it was a sort of natural development in terms of all this.

LI *So there was only a couple of years in between the publication of the City Forest, and your initial proposed project...?*

IM About two, I think. I've been trying to work this out - in that remnant file I found a letter, the only dated thing in it, a letter between me and a guy who was actually writing a book on Yeomans and apparently - I don't know whether it ever happened, I can't find any trace of it ever happening - but we were trying to actually make a time to meet up, and that's in late 1975. So my feeling is that I'd actually been working on it from late '74, because Victoria Street squats finished up, we were wiped out in January of '74 and somewhere in late 1974 I went to live up in the country and I think that was the time when I know I did a lot of work on it, so my thinking is I probably put up the proposal early in 1975, I was talking to this author in late 1975 about meeting up about it and I think it probably got canned very shortly after that, so probably about January '76 - and it would have been scheduled for sometime in 1976. That's my guess about it all, until we find out - well if Tony (Bond) can find the AGNSW trustee minutes, but they're the dates I've asked him to look at.

LI *So you think part of this, like what triggered your interest might have been that you were planning to, or you'd already moved up to the country?*

IM Well no it was going both ways, one of the reasons I moved up to the country was actually because of this, because what I wanted to do - see there's another thing that I'd started to get interested in at the same time, which was useful plants, not just like vegetables but all the other herbs and plants. It wasn't the normal 'I want a herb garden' type of thing, it was that I started getting really interested in the uses of Australian native plants and at that stage in the mid 1970s the last book that had been written on that was actually in the nineteenth century - there have been a million of them since but even though a lot of people had paid attention to it in various research papers through the twentieth century the last complete book on it had been Maiden's *Useful native plants of Australia* from the 1890s I think and that was reproduced in facsimile around the mid 70s after I had already been researching for a year or so.

LI *What sort of 'useful'?*

IM Well every sort, 'ethno-botany' is its technical name which is you know, 'what would Aboriginal have used all these plants for? which ones were food plants, which ones were medicine?' or even just things like, 'which plants do you get resins from?' to stick axe heads on a bit of stick or fibre to make rope and string. So I was really interested in that and I was vaguely plotting out this idea of creating backyard gardens - it's pretty funny really, with Diego sitting in the next room, it's a sort of reverse Diego - backyard gardens full of Australian native plants that were actually not there for their flowers or their aesthetics but because they could be eaten or could be turned into other things or you could make dyes out of them or whatever, so they were going to be collections of these things.

In 1974 just after Victoria Street I started doing all this research for that, going back through all these research papers and just trying to make lists of all the native plants that could be used like that. And a bit later when I moved out of Sydney, what I started to do up there was just slowly, very slowly started collecting any of those plants that I could then track down - which was very hard because people were really only collecting Australian plants, or growing Australian plants, for their looks, right? But I was going through all these plant catalogues looking for these other plants, trying to find plants that I actually knew were used for other things and trying to collect them together up there.

But in fact it was a very naïve and stupid idea because up there it was actually very hard.

*LI Where were you?*

IM Just outside of Bathurst, and I was actually on a really good piece of land, I was renting a place that was two acres which was on a creek and it was really good creek flats land, everything about it was good but you know you have droughts, the creek dries up, it all became one of those things where the problems were suddenly different and overwhelming and the Yeomans thing tied into that. Basically I had the two projects running at once and both of them failed for different reasons and never really happened.

*LI So you were aware of Yeomans through that particular book, The City Forest, but were you also aware of his experimental properties at that time?*

IM Well I very quickly found out about them after I found the books. Once I got interested, well when I got the idea of actually doing an exhibition about them, when I'd seen the photos of Nevallan and then I realised I knew Nevallan, I drove past it all the time and I actually recognised it quite easily, and so from that I actually approached him and he told me about other properties that I went and looked at, like the one at Orange for instance.

*LI Where was he living at the time?*

IM I don't know where he was living to tell you the truth.

*LI But you easily got hold of him?*

IM Oh yeah, well I got in contact easily because his engineering company, his manufacturing company where he made the ploughs and stuff was actually at Matraville, where I'd lived for part of my childhood so I actually knew where it was, near Botany and so I could go over there. But where he actually lived I don't know, to tell you the truth. And it was only a small company but a fairly big manufacturing plant there.

*LI And he was available and happy to chat with you about...?*

IM Yeah he was completely mystified really what the hell I was on about, but he was perfectly willing to chat to me and in fact I had quite a long meeting one day with him and the guy who was the manager of his company, about it all, and I think they just thought, 'OK, this is probably good publicity.'

*LI Yeah, now you were young at the time as well?*

IM Twenty-two or three. I've realised now how implausible it must have looked, quite frankly. When you're young and silly you don't realise quite how implausible you look, you know? But yeah it must have looked very implausible and if nothing else they must have wondered how on earth, why, would the Art Gallery of New South Wales be prepared to do anything with someone as young as me anyway? Apart from, 'why would you want to do this?' So in a funny sort of way their attitude towards it was almost pretty equal to the Art Gallery Trustees to the proposal.

*LI So why were the Art Gallery of New South Wales interested to do something with you initially?*

IM Because Daniel Thomas and I had been pretty good friends for a long time and - well, it seemed a long time then but it was a few years, since I'd been in my mid-teens. And I'd explained it to him, he understood the development of all this and how I'd got to this point. He understood my argument, my art-world argument about it, which was that there are plenty of other people who are creative and their work has aesthetic content as well as utilitarian value, and that they could be looked at as artists, that anyone who is in that sense working to change the culture in some way or another could easily be seen as an artist. I don't think he really agreed but this was an interesting thing as far as he was concerned to drop into the general argument that was going on in the early 70's. And he had a personal connection as well because Hilda Rix-Nicholas, who was a

very good woman painter from the 20's, 30's, who was a real member of the squattocracy, and he was interested in her work but more importantly her son I think had actually gone to Geelong Grammar with Daniel and then at a later stage when he'd grown up he actually reorganised their family farm to Keyline principles...

LI *Yeomans did?*

IM No, Hilda Rix-Nicholas's son

LI *Redid the family farm?*

IM Redid the family farm according to Keyline principles and so Daniel had - I mean Daniel would have to confirm that but I think that's the general story - and so Daniel actually had a personal knowledge of this and apart from that Daniel himself also came from a farming family in Tasmania, so he could see all of this and he knew about the various ways that contour ploughing and other land management techniques had developed, he already knew a little bit about the general history of the technology.

LI *So thinking back, you had this kind of plan in the works with Daniel Thomas as the - what was he, the director or...?*

IM At that stage he was the senior curator.

LI *OK, so you had a plan in the works with the senior curator to do an exhibition - was it that, like the equivalent of the contemporary art gallery inside the Art Gallery of New South Wales?*

IM Yeah that's right, they were doing a series of things called 'project shows'.

LI *Yeah, 'Contemporary Project Space' I think they call it now, isn't it?*

IM Yeah, that's exactly right, it was a small central space that they would just turn over to short, one-off things.

LI *So it's not a massive space?*

IM No it's not huge, but it was big enough- I didn't want a massive space.

LI *No, and what would it have looked like, this show?*

IM It probably would have had a few bits of equipment on the floor, like some of Yeoman's ploughs because his ploughs have a very distinctive sort of design - although it's probably more distinctive to people who understand ploughs, the average person probably would have thought 'yeah, that's a plough', but they had some very strange characteristics. But he also had a number of other hardware items, he made what he called 'flags' which were these stick and fabric things used to block irrigation channels and he invented a particular sort of baffle and valve - you see the normal farm dam doesn't have anything at the bottom of it to let the water out, water only comes out when it overflows at the top. Yeomans actually developed a quite cheap but very large and structurally sound system of baffles and valves that you built into the bottom of the dam so you could drain water out of the bottom - basically a big tap. So he had a series of hardware things that he had designed like that and I wanted to put those actually sitting around inside the physical space. On the walls I wanted a series of explanatory things about several different properties, how they actually worked, so you'd have diagrams, aerial photos and maps, a diagram of how the Keyline plough even worked, maybe a few photos of the whole thing in action and people using them. So it was explanations of the various processes involved in these farms and maybe a video of how the whole thing worked to pull it all together. But it would also have had an entirely different component, almost a necessity in terms of getting it through and that was the argument that I made about English landscape gardening. I argued that this was in a sense an Australian equivalent to the great English landscape gardeners like William Kent, Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton, who developed that naturalistic English form of landscape gardening which also functioned very well as a form of farming. So I was making a fairly radical argument about the nature of art by putting him up as an

Australian equivalent to the most conservatively acceptable form of English high culture, the naturalistic park surrounding the grand house of the English landed gentry.

LI *So the connection is that those people developed for England an appropriate system of farming which developed a kind of aesthetics of land but also made a system of farming that was sustainable within those local contexts, and your argument that you were putting forward through that exhibition was that Yeomans was the Australian...*

IM Was an Australian equivalent to that, and you have to remember that people like Kent and Brown and Repton were the epitome, the absolute epitome, the highest point almost of English culture in lots of ways, for anglophile Australians of that time. The landscape gardens surrounding the country house really represented English culture, you know the idolatry of the English landscape and gardens which exists to this day, so in a sense you're putting something really radical bang in the middle of a very conservative notion of what high culture was given that Australian high culture was basically still very much an anglophile culture at that time.

LI *So can it then be said to have been within a kind of tradition of avant-garde art which attempts to shift the parameters of what we regard as aesthetically acceptable? You know like, within art the sort of avant-garde tradition is that the next exhibition will always break the boundaries of what we see as acceptable, right?*

IM It'll always look wrong.

LI *It'll always look a bit wrong and it won't look genteel, and if you shift that to the farming, the aesthetics of farming your argument was that Yeomans was doing just that and at a certain point we would catch up to his avant-garde farming and we would see with fresh eyes that his way of making land look was actually a beautiful thing.*

IM Yeah.

LI *As opposed to the English way of making land look?*

IM That's right; I sort of argued that he was doing exactly what the English landscape designers were doing in the eighteenth century except the end result came out totally differently, because it was a different country and worked differently. I would add that the aesthetics of it now are almost irrelevant to me – really, even then I'd started to lose any interest in aesthetics as an aim – I mean I think aesthetics is important but I don't think aesthetics is the end point of art or culture, it's just one of the things along the way, but in terms of presenting those arguments then I used that aesthetic argument more than I would now.

LI *And how would you – I mean this is just a caricature, if you describe English landscape aesthetics as 'neat and tidy, parcelled and geometrically shaped' and so on...?*

IM But no I wasn't even talking about that sort of English small farm. People like Brown created open parkland with just clumps of trees, little clumps of trees scattered around; the interesting thing is that what went on again and again and again with the early explorers in Australia is that they would come to new areas which had been pretty much untouched by Europeans and they kept comparing it to English parkland because it had been pretty much formed by fire stick farming, to produce areas of big meadows for kangaroos, with clumped shelter trees and things like that dotted around everywhere. It was only after there'd been more European intrusions that a lot of these places actually later became much more heavily forested because they weren't being burned out all the time by the Aboriginals.

So there is this early thing where these people are coming from this English rural background where these types of big landscape parks had only developed

around grand country houses in the previous forty or fifty years say, and so they were taking what was virtually the current ruling class aesthetic of their time and looking at the Australian landscape and seeing it in those terms. That is one of the reasons why, apart from the fact that they were also then trained in a sort of European type agriculture, it was a really long time before people really managed to actually create a workable Australian style of agriculture. They'd come and impose a European reading on it, it'd work really well for about twenty or thirty years, then all of a sudden all the soil would be gone, or all sorts of things would start going wrong. The plains around Melbourne were a classic example, over thousands of years they had become filled with a type of tuber that supported the local aboriginals very well as they virtually farmed it. The Europeans just saw it as grazing land, put sheep on it who ate it down to the ground, this killed the tubers, the Aborigines started to starve with all sorts of conflict as a result and then the sheep starved too.

*LI So these things going wrong is partly what created that niche for Yeomans to do his thing, right?*

*IM* Yeah, especially by the first half of the twentieth century, you had really large scale irrigation going on all over the place, but also soil erosion on a really large scale, and the first response to that was contour ploughing of various sorts, which had been used a lot in America as a solution and so when Yeomans started in the 1940s he adopted the whole contour ploughing thing but then realised that in fact even though contour ploughing would stop soil degradation to a certain degree it didn't stop the run-off of water off the land whereas he actually wanted to stop the run-off and so it had to be done slightly differently. Instead of ploughing exactly to the horizontal contours you plough to the keyline, which almost makes the water run in the other direction, while retaining it. So it's one of those brilliant little bits of insight where someone - just by making a design change which has no cost whatsoever, it's just got to do with the way you look at something - suddenly produces a really completely, entirely different result. But my personal preoccupation in a way wasn't just about that, even though I'd become really interested in all that. My real preoccupation was about how did culture work? How did social values get generated and spread and transmitted. I really had lost complete faith in the art world; I really didn't think the art world did that at all even though it always had the pretensions to doing that, you know? And so I'd already stopped exhibiting, because I just didn't see exhibiting and making things which could be exhibited as the way to do it, but in this case I wanted to do an exhibition because I wanted to use that format to present an entirely different case.

Also I was really annoyed with Duchampianism, I was really annoyed with what was starting to happen, the way artists by appropriation were stealing creativity, were actually taking what other people did and then simply putting it into the art gallery virtually as their own, in some way, shape or form. I wanted to emphatically do the opposite, I was taking what somebody else did but I was talking about it, behaving like a curator and putting it in and saying, 'no, what this person is doing is actually what an artist claims to do' - which is create something which changes the culture.

*LI So this proposed show perhaps might not have looked very much like art?*

*IM* It wouldn't have looked like art at all I don't think, but having said that, you were talking of a time when there had been a lot of conceptual art and land art, so the idea of having a room full of maps and photos and documentation was not that shocking in itself and I tried to take advantage of that. In fact what I was trying to do was take it and turn it around by having all that stuff but showing something which actually functioned, as opposed to say a Michael Heizer or a Smithson which wasn't functional. Their work was an aesthetic object made out

of a landscape; what I was putting up was something which was a utilitarian object made out of the landscape which you could make an aesthetic interpretation. Basically I was quite consciously trying to turn the whole thing on its head.

LI *So it was kind of a critique of the existing current in land art work as well?*

IM Yeah and I was actually going to use the aesthetic they'd developed around land art and try and turn it into something else.

LI *So there's an inherent critique of farming technique but there's also an inherent critique of land art technique?*

IM Yeah, while - the funny thing being that of course because of land art that it was allowable.

LI *Right, so that's what might have allowed it to exist within the Art Gallery, is that it could be seen as a different, innovative form of land art?*

IM Yeah.

LI *But coming back to the idea of aesthetics, Heizer or Smithson used large earthmoving equipment to make things that were quite bold and excavation-like, often using destructive techniques in order to create a formal result, whereas what would a piece of land look like after it had been treated by Yeomans?*

IM Well it certainly wasn't like naturalistic bush. Yeomans had started off as a mining engineer, he was a guy who knew how to move big amounts of dirt and apparently he'd been involved in alluvial mining and using water for alluvial mining, so he knew how to build big dams, how to collect water, how to move it around a landscape, how to get it from place to place. So he was applying exactly that sort of knowledge.

That's where he's really different from permaculture people now who tend to operate on a really domestic sort of scale even if the theory isn't always that domestic scale. Yeomans works on a really big scale; he would regrade an entire landscape, he'd put great big channels through it. His farm dams were for the time enormous, really enormous, much bigger than the ones that were built on average around that time.

So he was used to shovelling dirt around on a really big scale and what you would end up with in a sense was this striped landscape; this landscape with big tree belts, big water channels of various sorts - the ploughing was there to stop the water from moving, but when you wanted to then use the water to irrigate other parts of it you'd need these big channels to move it and so they'd be there running across the landscape on a different angle. So the whole landscape was redesigned for controlling and moving water around, while at the same time keeping as much of it on the property in the same process.

LI *So if you talk about the aesthetics of a piece of land that Yeomans had worked on, the look of it would be seen as a kind of aggregate or result of the pragmatics of what he was trying to do to it from an engineering point of view?*

IM Yeah, it really is a case of form and content being the same thing. It really is a very functional sort of aesthetics but very distinctive - I mean as soon as you see one, you know it.

LI *Do they have a kind of beauty about them?*

IM Oh yeah, they really are stunning, especially once they've grown. There's this landscape with these big linear belts of trees across them. In a sense it's a beauty like what you see in those Asian paddy fields around hillsides; it's obviously a very man-made sort of landscape and on the other hand it's very naturalistic at the same time, and the reason it's very naturalistic is because it tends to optimise the use of everything and so you end up with really good grassland, good trees, lots of wildlife - every thing's functioning together; it's not like those big barren wheat farms which just look like gigantic factories in a way, it wasn't like that.

LI *I wonder to what extent the ethics of his interactions with land was informed by the fact that in order to carry out one of his interventions on a piece of land he had to really get to know it, like he had to really acknowledge the existing topography of the way that the ups and downs flowed and so on, rather than come in with a series of rectangles or grids and just impose them, you know obviously see that topography as a kind of inconvenience?*

IM Yeah.

LI *What I'm saying is if you're going to see the existing topography as an asset rather than an inconvenience, then it means that you actually deal with land in an (ethical?) way?*

IM That's right, it's a very complex subject but there were already a whole bunch of actual movements going around the world this time around organic farming, and I don't mean the Steiner-type stuff, I mean really industrial scale farming – Sir Albert Howard and all his work on composting and traditional Asian farming methods, for instance or on tea plantations. There was a series of books being written this time like 'Farmers of Forty Centuries', which was about Chinese farming and its sustainability over a really long period, so there's a sort of a movement going on at the time. There's also some creepy aspects to that movement as well, it's not worth going into right now, but there's some weird politics to some of those things.

So there is all that but there's another thing about this, which I think fits into modernism and Fordism. One of the dynamics is as you were saying, a developing factory farming approach where you just impose by sheer force of will a series of ways of making the landscape work, both by the use of large scale machinery, by the use of chemical fertilisers, by the use of a whole series of things like that, imposing on the landscape rather than working with it. And that ties in with, for instance, the deskilling of labour, so that you can employ cheap, unskilled labour both in factories to make cars but also on farms as well, because they don't have to know really how the system works or how the land works, you know they just go in and do these mechanical processes that have been designed in Fordist ways.

That's very different to a sort of peasant farming on the one hand - which shouldn't be mythologised because it's an awful life on the whole but it does involve knowing how your land works and getting the maximum out of it with the least input because you don't have the resources to input very much, or on the other hand to the Australian family farm which is really just a more large scale and successful version of peasant farming.

But Yeomans was starting with the family farm and basically working on how do you actually use observation and skill and intelligence and design to make a farm and a landscape work, rather than approaching it in a heavy handed industrial sort of way. So on that level he's running counter to the tendencies of that part of modernism, the industrial approach to all forms of production. Even though he was reasonably successful, it was always a very qualified sort of success because the real tendency overall in say the government-run farm advisory services was the industrial approach, to tell everybody to hit every paddock with super phosphate, for instance - you could increase yields easily and quickly with artificial fertilisers.

The government did strongly encourage contour ploughing and other forms of soil conservation because of the land degradation issues but they were also very strongly encouraging chemical farming and their approach to water was to facilitate run-off and he's running very much against that. His whole thing is, you improve the soil, and you improve the soil by ploughing in a certain sort of way which will increase water retention and organic matter in the soil.



LI *So just to come back to the exhibition of the time, the proposed exhibition; you were going to have this show, Yeomans was – you told him that you were going to do it, he is sort of giving you his blessing but he was a bit bemused about the whole thing...*

IM Oh he definitely gave me his blessing and he was definitely bemused.

LI *And if it had gone ahead he would have come and seen it?*

IM I'm sure.

LI *At what stage did it get pulled?*

IM It got pulled after the proposal had been written, I was running around doing a lot of research and starting to work out what things I could actually get, and starting to get to the point where I'd gone out and visited a range of existing farms and seen how they worked, and was starting to work out how I could present them. I was collecting material like maps and photos and things like that. We had a pretty clear idea of what was going to be in it and I was just getting all the bits together and I talked to him about what actual hardware we could borrow to put in it, so it was getting to that reasonably advanced sort of stage. It was on the schedule for sure for the year, so it was definitely going ahead – as far as we were all concerned, anyway.

LI *And then how long before it was due to happen did it get cancelled?*

IM Oh it was still a fair way away; it was about, my guess – I'm just trying to remember but it would have to have been somewhere like six months or something like that, maybe even a bit longer, you know before it was pulled. So – yeah it's, it's about as far away as we are now from the show

LI *And what reasons did they give at the time?*

IM Well no one gave any official reasons except that I know what Daniel said and I know what other people told me, and I gather the discussion was – I mean I even know who the trustee was who pushed most against it, he was a judge who was a bit of a Pitt Street farmer, who...

LI *What's that mean?*

IM Well basically he had a hobby farm, but a biggish hobby farm, and so he knew a bit about farming and he recognised the name. So obviously he'd been aware of keyline. And there was a certain amount of hostility to Yeomans as well although I don't think that's what drove his objection to it, I think what drove his objection to it was just, 'what the hell are we doing showing this stuff? This guy designs farm machinery, what are we doing having a show of that?' and basically he just saw it as a trade show, especially when he was told that what we were going to put in it was what you would put in a trade show, that was effectively exactly what we were saying.

LI *Yeah, well I guess in that sense you were working with that conceptual art paradigm of its time, which is to show primary objects and information...*

IM In an art context.

LI *...with as little artistry as possible.*

IM Yeah, that's exactly right and one of the things is too, it's like the thing about land art. I've got to qualify what I'm always saying, that I was objecting to Duchampian appropriationism, because in a sense I was using it too; I was taking these objects and putting them in an art gallery but the difference was that I was attributing them to the person who had already made them, I wasn't saying that my choosing them was adding anything.

LI *So if you'd done a series of paintings of Yeomans, or prints or something...*

IM That probably would have been quite acceptable, yeah that's exactly right.

LI *And of landscape and so on...*

IM Yeah, even if I'd done a series of atmospheric photos, you know? So if it was nothing but a photographic exhibition I probably would have got away with it

but I didn't, I was doing it as a much more pedagogic sort of thing to present him and his work.

LI *It occurs to me that part of the issue you had then with having it accepted within an art context is part of the problem that Milkwood Permaculture has now; those guys are artists, they've moved into their latest project which is a really long term one - it involves permaculture education as well as using their own piece of land as their number one experiment - and the art world has just kind of drifted away from them, and they themselves doubt their own role*

IM That's exactly what happened to me the more I did stuff like this and the more I made these arguments. People say, 'oh you left the art world' - no, the art world left me, you know? I mean it drifted away, it just didn't see, no matter how I tried to explain. If you go back through things I've written you'll find me trying to make the argument in about ten different ways at different points in time. I'm not saying the same thing all the time but the reason I'm not saying the same thing all the time is because I'm trying to actually say it in a way that will get people to understand this, and yet people don't get it. In fact the worst is that they get a real parody of it, which is like, 'my life is my art', you know this sort of crap. That's not what we're saying, we're saying that certain apparently everyday actions or activities or whatever go beyond what they appear to be, they are actually reshaping the culture in some way by reshaping people's understanding of how the world works and what it's doing. They're not even always very innovative. What they are is that appropriate thing applied at a certain moment in time which changes the direction.

So if you try and apply lots of art world type criteria to it like innovation, novelty, aesthetics and stuff like that, that doesn't work. Apart from the fact that it doesn't look like art on the other hand it doesn't necessarily look that innovative either, it looks like, 'hey, those guys are just doing permaculture', or, 'no, Ian's just being a political activist' or whatever when what is really happening is that I tried to be a political activist doing something in a particular point in time which I thought might actually change the culture in some particular way. Sometimes to do that you try and be really innovative and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you just use whatever tools are already at hand. You regard this thing as a problem and you'd use whatever tools might actually produce a result you're trying to get at the time.

And yes that's exactly the problem I think Milkwood faces, especially because to do it well, as they do, you start looking even more and more conventional - you have good graphics on your website for instance but they are not necessarily arty graphics. It has to be really accessible to achieve the result you want so you use conventional graphics done really well rather than over the top innovative design that may well disorient people.

LI *Well that's right, in some ways it's similar to what I was thinking about the aesthetics of Yeoman's pieces of land; they come about as the result of the process...*

IM Of farming, not the processes of producing an aesthetic farm in the way that a garden aims to be aesthetic.

LI *That's right, so Milkwood's website comes about due to the processes of setting up a permaculture education business, rather than the processes of presenting something within an art context.*

IM That's exactly right, and to go back to that other project of mine, the thing about the useful plants, effectively what I was going to do was set up a nursery which is a very conventional thing to do but the point is it was to be a very specific specialised sort of nursery in a specific context, a real world context that had little value to the art world. The art world has a real problem with you not going back to them to validate stuff. I mean there's very little left for the art

world in some ways, even though it's become huge and there's huge amounts of money involved there's very little intellectual content left in the art world any more. The only bit they can still try to claim is that you should have to come back to them to validate your other excursions so to speak, and if you don't even do that then it becomes really problematic for them.

*LI So that raises two questions: the first one is, is there some value in going back to the art world, at all? Because it seems to me you must have thought that there would have been in order to be going with this deal in the first place with Daniel, and then once you've thought about that, what about now?*

*IM Well then I still hadn't completely disentangled myself from the art world as my audience; I still saw the art world as my audience – you know, even though I was trying to put different stuff to them, I still thought I should do it. Now I just see the art world as 'an audience', just one of many, you know? But given that I'm now, you know getting older and older, there is another issue to think about although it was starting to be part of my thinking back around then. It was sort of like, 'how did the institutional art world start out?' What I mean is there is one way that I will concede that the art world has a unique value. If I just see the art world as being museums then museums have a role to collect and maintain history and analyse and re-present it, right? But that role has been usurped from within in lots of ways, especially in the last half of the twentieth century, particularly – rather than recording history they have begun to try and control and manufacture it just like the mainstream media now tries to control politics rather than just report it. You know for decades now they've virtually started entreprenuring art styles in various ways, which I think is really just wrong, basically, even apart from the fact that it will inevitably blow up in their face and they will be seen to have been repeatedly mistaken. On the other hand their role as museums in which they collect evidence of what's happened and they explain it and present it to people, re-present it to people, I think is a really valuable thing for them to do, and at this point in my life I don't have a great difficulty myself in going and doing that, and I even do things which look much more like conventional art works than I ever did before, but they are almost invariably things which re-present earlier stuff that I've done and present it in a way which rather condescendingly fits into an art-world way of looking at stuff. So if I was dealing with a trade union audience, I'd do a trade union journal; if I'm dealing with an art world audience I'll make works of art that fit their expectations because quite frankly they can't deal with anything that is really different, despite their rhetoric.*

*Of course it is condescending in a way to do that but the art world audience simply isn't the smartest or most perceptive audience. So I don't see it as a great achievement to do things for them, it's both patronising to them and demeaning to me to say, 'okay if this is the only way you guys are going to understand it let's put it in these terms for you', but it's also an example like where earlier I was saying about playing around with all these different ways of doing the same thing, you know – by camouflaging it as art you're just putting it in the language of a different audience.*

*LI But clearly now the art world is – it's constantly expanding its capacity to understand different languages and categories of object and so on.*

*IM Yeah, I think to a point which is now almost boundless they can swallow anything.*

*LI You could imagine your agricultural trade show of 1976 being unproblematically accepted now?*

*IM Completely unproblematically.*

LI *But also your role - you call yourself the curator of it rather than the Duchampian artist of it - that role of the artist as curator has now become a kind of...*

IM Has become understandable - yeah and not only that; the fact that as an artist I could do all sorts of different things is now understandable to a degree, but that wasn't true three decades ago. you know? Now I don't so much have to have a product line. I can do this here, and something different there and something different there, and whatever.

LI *Yeah, Andrea Fraser calls it 'service art'. it's like you're a service industry.*

IM Yeah it's sort of true, yeah I can understand that. But that's acceptable and understandable now. That really wasn't very acceptable thirty or forty years ago - in fact it was sort of incomprehensible.

LI *So coming to now then, why revisit this?*

IM I've asked myself that. (laughter) Because you asked me to? But obviously I could have said 'no'. It's partly because of one of the ways this started off; because as you know I've been talking about 'things that didn't happen' as a sort of category and I think things that didn't happen are often important things - quite often the most important things.

LI *Why is that?*

IM Because they're usually the problematic things where you've been trying to work things out in some way or another and they're really crucial to you, you know? Or certainly this has been the case with me; a lot of the most important projects for me have been ones that never actually finally got off the ground, or failed, didn't turn out the way they were meant to, or got compromised in some way. Or, mostly, I screwed them up in some way or other. It's interesting to actually document those things that didn't happen simply because they can be so important and they can be the things that really define your life for you, even though it's not very obvious to anyone on the outside.

LI *Because the fact that it didn't happen reveals certain things about the operations of the art world at the time - that's one possible thing?*

IM Yes and not only that but it still allowed me to move forward in my thinking about what I was doing, so the process of going through it was still ultimately productive.

LI *So a failure, rather than being something you just bury, becomes something you learn...*

IM It's still something you learn from and you move forward from, in some way or another. It would have been the last thing probably that I did in the conventional art world but as it turned out the last thing I did was three, four years earlier than that, because this didn't happen. So the last thing I exhibited then as far as I can work out was in early 1972.

LI *So this was a confirmation of your hunch at the time that it was time to...?*

IM Walk away, yeah.

LI *Was there any - I'm thinking about asking this question because I know that if we write up some of these notes people will want to have this question asked - is there any possibility that one of the reasons why this project didn't happen is because of your personality, because you got cranky? Or is there a particular method of negotiating with institutions?*

IM Let me say straight off, there's been a lot of other cases where that is absolutely the case but not in this one because it was Daniel Thomas that did the negotiating and not me, and Daniel has a great history of pulling things off; if Daniel couldn't pull it off, no one could have.

LI *So you didn't have a falling out with Daniel per se?*

IM No, no I never had a falling out with Daniel at all, there was nothing like that whatsoever, no, the whole thing was all fairly rosy and we were both

unhappy about cancellation and we are still good friends. I must say in my defence that while I'll admit I can be abrasive and sometimes undiplomatic I'm a lot more brutal to art world institutions than I am to others; there's lots of other institutions, like the trade union movement for instance, that I managed to get along with fairly well, but the art world, at a certain point in the early 70's I lost my temper with them, ranted and raged out of sheer frustration. Now I just belt them if they get within range.

There are a lot of people in the art world who feel really personally threatened by anyone who criticises it, especially when it is someone like me who knows so much about it and can't be easily dismissed except by calling me crazy. I'm not crazy but I suppose I am a sort of apostate and there is nothing believers hate more than an apostate. And I'm the worst sort of apostate, one who is demanding more radicalism rather than more conservatism.

*LI But it seems like here we are heading towards an exhibition at ACCA and the curator that we're working with is treating us very honourably and treating you with respect as a kind of veteran - a wise man, sort of thing. So although obviously we still hold out the possibility of it not turning out rosy, but how do you feel about that move back? Or move - not even 'back', I mean you're moving towards something that you've never even felt before, a kind of acceptability.*

*IM Yeah well like I said before, you could hardly say this is a different version of the exhibition because there was never a first version of it, in fact, there was just an attempt but there was never a completed version of it. Honestly, I don't know how I feel and there are other people like Glenn Barkley who is perceptive and sympathetic yet even he was recently writing that I'm the most baffling artist around - still. I'm getting to an oldish age and I still manage to be baffling, which I put down to the fact that even though I think 'what am I doing wrong? What am I still doing wrong? Why is it people don't get it?' maybe what is happening is people do get it, they just don't like it, they really, really don't like it, you know?*

*LI What don't they like?*

*IM Well I think once you think through my position, when you understand what it really means, then it takes away a lot of the art world's and artists', existing artists, sense of self, sense of identity - their sense of superiority even although most of them will never admit to feeling that. Because really it says, 'you mightn't actually be anybody special at all; you're just someone making things', you know? The people who are real artists might be these other people who you don't even know about, and who don't even think that they're artists - who don't even call themselves 'artists'. So it removes the art world's sense of privilege and sense of superiority, once you actually get your head around the basic idea. What I'm saying is, just because you call yourself an artist and you exist in the art world doesn't mean you are an artist. Being an artist is something you can't decide to be; what you've got to do is go and do things and then in a sense in retrospect it can be decided whether you are an artist.*

*LI It's a bit paradoxical isn't it, because who gets to make that decision about whether...?*

*IM Probably the art world; that's the joke of it all, but then when you look back on the history of the art world that's the way it's always been - people are really successful in their lives and then written off within ten years afterwards as basically being 'the Salon', 'academic' and whatever and suddenly people no one ever thought of rise to the surface, and that has often been other people who were least recognisable as artists making artistic products. What I'm saying is, they won't even be people making artistic products, they'll be people who are making other things altogether that you never even thought of as being in the mix, like designing farms. That might be easier to understand if I was saying they*

were animators for instance; people think of that in terms of visual imagery and things like that, they could get their head around that - 'Chuck Jones? okay it's alright, I get it' you know? But Percy Yeomans? 'Who the fuck's he? He was a farming engineer'.

LI *So I'm getting around to the idea that you're playing on the edge of this Duchampian line of importing a non-art thing into an art context, right? But not necessarily claiming the act of framing as your art?*

IM The act of framing is irrelevant you know? That's what Duchamp was doing but I'll just go against the whole grain of all history here, I think people really misread Duchamp you know, completely. The way that appropriationism developed, Duchamp must roll in his grave with laughter the way that it just became art in that sort of way. Because effectively...

LI *Mm, that style.*

IM Yeah, whereas I would have thought that what Duchamp was doing was basically abolishing both art and the artwork by doing that, and having it become art is like pulling off the ultimate joke on the art world.

LI *In fact he was reaffirming it, I mean - or that's how...*

IM Well the art world has been able to reaffirm it. It's like Marcuse's whole theory about repressive tolerance - instead of being confronted by an attack an institution can just absorb it and make it part of its own rhetoric without actually changing.

LI *So we can read the failure of your project at the time and our revisiting it now as a kind of means of informing the art world and therefore broadening it in some way. What about the other direction? By working on this project, what do you reckon we contribute to the world of Yeomans, which normally exists without thinking about art?*

IM Publicise it to some extent; beyond that probably not a lot because this is where you get to the issue of audiences - I mean the art world has a particular audience. It's an audience which in other aspects of life is part of other audiences as well, you know it's not just something bundled up in a box which is 'the art world', but it is just a certain specific audience and mostly it's not the people who own farms or who have agricultural sustainability as a key concern, right? And so all we're doing is delivering this information to one small audience, and saying, 'here are these interesting things and you should look at them and you should think about them' but we're also saying, 'you should think about what it is you're doing, what is it that you're doing that might actually be as important as what these people are doing?'

LI *What do you mean by - 'what you're doing', what?*

IM Well I'm talking about artists because I actually think most of the time when you're addressing the art world you're addressing artists or rather people who call themselves artists. And you're saying, 'well think about what you do as an artist - is it as important as what these people are doing?'

LI *As in Yeomans?*

IM As in Yeomans, as in Milkwood, as in some other artists that we know who are actually grappling with exactly those issues. So hopefully that might make a few people rethink what they're doing and broaden what they do as well, you know? But in the end people are going to do what they feel comfortable with and interests them, but it's good to make them think about it a bit more.

LI *I wonder if as artists approaching this project, when we start talking to people who are within a non-art context, like the Yeomans's of today, whether they will view what we're doing with a similar kind of slightly bemused approval, like, 'okay go ahead with it, but I don't really quite'...?*

IM Yeah I think that's probably exactly right; I mean I think in a sense it goes back to the AGNSW Trustees' response to the exhibition which as you know was

'what has this got to do with us?' I often say that Australians don't like art but they like stuff that looks like art, and that goes across the whole population. So it's not only the art world that might find this argument about cultural evolution puzzling, that probably also applies to the people who we might admire and think what they're doing is really good, but really their concept of what art and culture is will probably be fairly conventional and so they don't think of themselves as artists even if we are arguing that they are the real artists. So they're also going to say "what on earth are you talking about?"

The reality is that we're part of this rarefied, really rarefied, discussion about 'what is art?' and 'what is culture?' and how does it recreate itself and transmit itself and adapt itself over time? And you want two results out of this – you want to change the art world, you want to change the rest of the world, and it's not going to work necessarily the same for both of them. I suppose that's a long winded way of saying I'm not sure how they'd respond in some way.

LI *Yeah well that's yet to be found out but - yeah.*

IM So all we can do is try and see what actually happens. Hopefully we'll have a bit of a debate about this in the course of it, because I don't think it's been debated enough. It's been debated in really painfully esoteric, academic terms often enough, but I don't want to see it debated in those terms, I want to see it debated in plain English you know, with actual examples for them to think about. And there hasn't been enough of that.

LI *I had one more question, which was - obviously there's the revisiting of what didn't happen in 1975 and the consideration of that as a little micro history, and why in retrospect it was an important thing to have learned from etcetera, but then there's also the thing about thirty five years on from that, the figure of Yeomans and his work, how it has changed in terms of how it's considered and its importance in the culture now.*

IM Yeah, it's changed enormously. Well I think although he was very prominent in his field at the time; I think now that field has changed completely and I think he is recognised as having had an enormous effect. So in a sense what I was pointing at has developed and come true in all sorts of ways, that he is seen as this really major figure, he's had a lot of influence on a lot of people, so you're looking at the effects of what he did, you're looking at a whole lot of things that didn't exist at the time. But all we can do is document them, so that – there's also been some really weird effects, which tells you other things about how the world works, I think.

LI *Yeah, well we can look into that. I think that's all I've got now - it's probably enough isn't it?*

IM Yeah, there's about a hundred times more than we can use. I do like the question about me being grumpy. (laughter) Well it's true; look I mean there's no question about it, you know Wendy, my wife, when she was first looking at all this stuff of mine, we met because she got the job of doing a research project on me in the late 1990s and she read all those things I wrote in the 70s where I'm just ranting angrily and she was horrified. The point about it was that I had just really lost my temper with the art world, completely lost it. I've since read a couple of critics who complain that I had a scorched earth approach to art then and that's not far wrong.

And you know I can be an irascible sort of person, to put it mildly; I can be a really rude person particularly to art world fools, but on the other hand I would never have been able to survive in say the trade union movement where I did a huge amount of work if I wasn't capable of all sorts of diplomacy and subtle manoeuvring. Unions are much tougher than the art world. The art world's more vicious than unions I would add, but unions are much tougher, you're dealing

with real world issues, there's really big things at stake in the trade union movement and they all ultimately have a reality test that trumps bullshit. I just find the conservatism of the art world crossed with its self-image of radicalism is just absurd; it's one of the most conservative parts of society and yet it's the most deluded about its conservatism - it's extraordinarily conservative yet it has a rhetoric of radicalism and I just found that infuriating and very frustrating and so in the end, nine times out of ten I just whack them, I just want to hit them and ridicule them, yell at them 'don't be so fucking stupid, start thinking about this stuff - do better; you've got to do better' you know? And I think most of the art world isn't capable of that, they just want to conform and basically have a career just like bank clerks but making pretty trinkets. And that's got worse since the 70's because you couldn't have much of a career in the 70's, there wasn't the money, there was barely a scene. The scene's much bigger now and you can have careers, so there are real things to be won and lost in a sense, but that just makes it even more frustrating to deal with.

And I even think more of the intellectual content has gone out of the art world over time, which is very depressing. Although I also think - and the fact that this exhibition is going on now is a sign - that a whole cycle of stuff has ended, and there's a change coming. And it'll have its own problems but nonetheless we're going back and looking at what was at the beginning of this period. On the one hand you have what eventually became a really commercialised version of conceptual art, in which the actual guts of conceptual art was removed and the aesthetic exterior was retained. On the other hand I was part of the group who wasn't prepared to just be turned into tame aesthetic objects for institutions and so I went off in a different direction but the ones who went the other way, the conventional way, I think have slowly worn out their welcome, I think that is what's happened in some way or another. Even though there is now this gigantic, gigantic scene around that sort of commercialised conceptualism, the whole Biennale scene's part of it, it just looks more and more vacuous. And collectors and institutions throw huge amounts of money around and think they are actually important and yet all it takes to turn it all into monopoly money is one generation of artists that turns their back on them - look what happened to the great academic art of the nineteenth century, little more than a worthless joke within a generation or two. And for the same reason, it wasn't looking to the future, it was just like the commercial conceptualism of biennale art, endlessly rehashing the past in increasingly gimmicky ways.

You can think of it in music terms; I mean it's sort of like the Phil Collins bland overproduced sort of gigantic stadium bands versus grungy garage band punk - I'm afraid I'm with the grungy garage band punk even in my old age, rather than with the big stadium stuff. I think that's sort of what happened, you've got this big commercialised version of conceptualism but you've got this whole other stream, much less publicised but much more radical, and the interesting thing about that whole other stream is that I think it's only become obvious again because of the internet. For twenty or thirty years I knew there must have been other people around the world who'd reacted like I had and had done similar stuff, but I could never find them. Now because of the internet I know who lots of them are and I am in communication with them, but it took a whole revolution in the way communications works for those people to actually link up and find themselves and find each other. So it's been the creation of distribution media not controlled by the institutional cultural gatekeepers that has finally, decades later, let the radical potential of conceptualism finally start to get more of a showing.

Apart from which, yeah I'm a difficult, cranky, grumpy old bastard and I was one when I was young too.